



AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE

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Looking at that girl's eyes, Zagan felt his heart tremble. He felt the sensation of something running from the tips of his toes all the way to the top of his head.

Shortly after, the mantle was removed from the figure within his view. And what was revealed... was a lovely girl with pointy long ears.

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Manuela

The clerk at the clothing shop where Zagan and Nephly went to buy clothes. Her characteristic cheerfulness allows her to get along with just about anyone.

Chastille Lillqvist

A girl who inherited a Sacred Sword, and earned the title Maiden of the Sacred Sword. Though she is a master of the blade, she is far too serious and thus easily deceived. After failing to subjugate a sorcerer, she was saved by Zagan, and is now conflicted by her feelings for him, a sorcerer who is made out to be evil.

Barbatos

A sorcerer who hangs out with Zagan. He's quite a skilled sorcerer, and is one of the candidates to become the next Archdemon.

Nephelia

An elf woman with snow-white hair. Her nickname is Nephly. Even among the elves, who possessed a high level of mana, hers was extraordinarily high, and she was treated as a 'cursed child.' Little by little, she grows to feel affection for Zagan, who told her that 'he needed her.'

Zagan

An orphan who was abducted by a certain sorcerer as a child, but then slaughtered him and stole all his assets and knowledge. After falling in love with Nephly at first sight and purchasing her, he worries over how to properly convey his feelings.



A thunderous
roar rocked the
cave as the stone
wall crumbled.
And a man
suddenly stalked
out of the cloud
of dust formed by
the explosion.

“You...
injured
Nephy,
right?”

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Prologue

What exactly should I do about this...!? Zagan found himself in quite a predicament.

He was presently in his castle, which had floors made of weathered oak that perfectly matched the stone walls covered in moss. There were carpets on the ground and ornaments adorning the walls to try and cover them, but Zagan never really did any maintenance.

It had been at least two hundred years since its construction, and it was a completely secluded castle with a gloomy atmosphere.

However, before Zagan, who was sitting atop the throne of that castle with his legs crossed as he leaned back, was a young girl who was quietly standing stock-still.

The first thing that would catch one's attention was her snow-white hair that extended down to her waist. After that, there was the deep crimson ribbon which decorated her locks. She had a small face, large azure eyes that looked like the summer sky, and her lips were a moderately pale pink.

Covering her dainty limbs was a white dress, and through the opening at the chest one could catch a glimpse of two large bulges, which greatly contrasted her thin figure.

However, her eyes were awfully hollow, and her ears tapered into a point.

A member of the legendary race that had been called fairies from Norden since ancient times — an elf.

An individual with snow-white hair was especially rare, and was said to possess tremendous power.

Those girls were considered closer to divinity than humans, but precisely because of that holiness, there was no small number of humans who targeted them. A single strand of their hair, a single drop of their blood, or even the lives of those girls themselves held unfathomable power as a magical catalyst.

And around that ephemeral and mystical girl's neck... was a boorish collar with a chain attached to it.

A slave's collar.

And so, this girl's existence itself was the identity of Zagan's anguish.

How exactly do I start a conversation with the girl I love...!? A few hours ago, when he fell in love at first sight with this elf and ended up purchasing her, he was still fine. However, since Zagan had almost no opportunities so far in life to speak with a girl of marriageable age, he was now at a loss. He had no idea how to attract the heart of the opposite sex.

The girl in question was also one he purchased, so she had the social status of a slave. Perhaps because of the tension, her expression was stiff. It was to the point where one could describe it as expressionless.

Still, he knew he couldn't just stay silent forever. He had to say something.

Zagan tried reciting the words in his head.

'The sky is lovely isn't it?' ...No. That's no good. No good at all.

This was a room with no windows, and if one were to look up at the ceiling, they would be able to spot rusted chains hanging from several torture devices. Besides, in the first place, it was supposed to be overcast outside.

No matter how he thought of it, that was no good. In that case, exactly what should he say?

'What do you think of this castle?' Wait, think about it calmly. Isn't this an abandoned castle littered with corpses and sorcery apparatuses? It looks like an execution site or hell, doesn't it? That was the only reply that came to mind.

Or rather, he was now regretting that he hadn't at least cleaned the place up before bringing her along.

And then, it happened just about when half an hour had passed. The one to open their mouth first... wasn't Zagan.

"Master. Would you permit me... a question... perhaps?" It was a quiet and pleasant voice, akin to that of a chime.

“...What?” Having given a blunt reply, Zagan was at his wit’s end.

Putting it like that, it’s like I’m taking offense, right!? Even though she finally spoke to him herself, he had screwed it all up. And while Zagan was writhing in agony, the girl said the following in a tone like she felt nothing at all.

“Just how... will you be... killing me?”

Zagan then opened his mouth in complete astonishment.

“Hold up! Why would I kill you?”

“Huh...? Am I... wrong?” While saying that, the girl gazed up to the things hanging from the walls and ceiling.

Saws with blood plastered on them, iron coffins with long needles attached to the insides, shears of various shapes and sizes, and many other unparalleled dangerous goods were left around as if they were mere decorations.

They were torture devices left behind by the previous owner of the castle.

And even before that, I left the corpse of the intruder from this morning in the foyer, too. It’s no wonder she’s scared...

Thinking back on it, he felt like the girl’s body had stiffened upon seeing that corpse, which was the body of someone who met a violent end by having their head blown off.

If there existed a sorcerer who would bring a girl to such a creepy place and pleasantly claim ‘I’m a gentleman. I won’t do anything scary to you,’ then Zagan himself would start by giving them a good socking.

With a drip and a drop, cold sweat ran down his spine.

Gazing into the eyes of the girl that seemed to have lost any sign of hope, Zagan was unable to make any excuses.

The beginning of this situation... Well, that was something that happened on the morning of this very day.

Chapter I: First Love is a Nasty Disease That Everybody Suffers

Right at the break of dawn, a shrill scream rang out within an otherwise silent forest.

The foliage from the densely packed trees spread out overhead like a ceiling. It was a forest where even the light of day was obstructed. The neighboring towns even referred to it as the Forest of the Lost. In the center of this forest was an ancient abandoned castle covered in ivy, where rumors had it that a sorcerer who was either a ghost or a devil resided.

And within that eerie forest, Zagan was taking a walk.

He was a young man who would turn eighteen this year. Sporting a black robe with red lining, he had black hair and silver eyes, handsome and noble features. If he dressed slightly more tidily, he could likely name himself as some noble without being so much as second guessed.

“Meyers, please stop! Come to your senses...” Taking a look, he could see a single woman being pinned down by a man dressed like an Angelic Knight.

She was still quite young, likely of the age to still be called a girl. She had beautiful red hair like polished copper and deep blue eyes. Her skin was white, almost as if it were transparent. From the smooth lines of the bridge of her nose, he could sense a certain air of refinement like that of a noble from her. Still, the impression she gave off as a tomboy was far stronger than that.

However, even that lively face was now twisted with fear.

Was it correct to assume that it was the daughter of a noble and her escort? Zagan was thinking of such things while he walked toward them at a relaxed pace.

And during that time, the girl resisted violently and scratched the man’s face.

“Urgh!” However, the one to turn pale from that was not the man. After all,

the face that the girl's nails dug into... smoothly peeled off.

His skin peeled open, and chunks of meat mixed with blood dripped down, drop after drop.

"Eek..." Seeing that ghastly spectacle, the girl let out a yelp.

There was no face behind the skin that was smoothly peeled off. Since the ears and nose were scraped off, he had lost his cheekbones along with any distinguishing features.

So the man is a sorcerer, huh? Zagan knew that his face was the price he paid for sorcery.

With that grotesque face thrust before her at such close proximity, the pitiful girl's teeth clattered as she trembled.

And as the man took a knife out from his waist, he slid it across the chest of the girl as if brushing her.

"Ah!" With a gentle flutter, her shirt was cut open and her breasts were exposed. It was easy to imagine what would happen next to the girl.

Staring at the girl, who was no longer able to let out her voice out of shame and terror, the man laughed.

"Haha, you're making quite the stimulating face there, aren't you? Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not gonna rape you like you're hoping. A virgin, you see, is quite valuable to a sorcerer."

—There's no way I'll defile your body— Upon hearing his intentions, the girl's expression showed signs of relief for an instant.

However, what the girl did not know was that she was going to go through something far more repulsive than being defiled.

"The skin of a virgin's face, which has been peeled off while she is still alive is... quite a good medium, yes. Don't die on me too quickly now, understand?" The pieces of meat that had fallen to the ground were reflected in the girl's eyes.

"N-No... NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Seeing the girl scream, the man smiled as if his mood was growing jollier.

“Besides, I personally can’t get enough of peeling off the face of a good-looking woman like you. Relax, after I finish peeling off your face, I’ll show your body plenty of love! Hihiyahyaha!” And it was just at that time that Zagan arrived right behind the man.

As he grasped the man’s head like an eagle, he easily lifted him up with a single hand.

“H-Huh...?” Upon having the knife that he had pressed against the girl’s face pulled away, the man raised an idiotic voice.

“Wh-Who the hell are you!?” It didn’t seem he understood the situation he was in, and Zagan was exasperated at the angered man.

“Right back at you. I don’t care if you’re raping or torturing her, but going off and fooling around in someone else’s garden... Even though I was going to take a nap, I’m wide awake now.” Disturbing his nap... Hearing those words, which showed not a single hint of pity toward the girl’s situation, not only the man, but the girl was also in shock.

With the abandoned castle at its center, this entire forest was Zagan’s domain. And also, at the same time, nobody had ever defeated Zagan in this place.

Precisely because he was a sorcerer, the man at least understood the meaning to that. He immediately cast aside his knife and raised both his hands.

“W-Wait! You’re a sorcerer just like me, right? Even if you kill me, there’d be nothing for you to gain. If you let me go, I’ll hand over my research results!” He was begging for his life. Moreover, it was in the realm where he was fine with resigning all of his assets.

To a sorcerer, one’s research was equivalent to one’s own power. Because just by taking hold of knowledge, one was able to touch upon just that much more sorcery.

And despite this, Zagan glared at the man with suspicious eyes, and said the following as if spitting out at him.

“That shitty sorcery that can only be used by peeling off fresh skin? I don’t need it.” And immediately following that, the man’s head splattered to pieces

like a crushed fruit.

“...Ah, I went and did it.” The man’s body still straddled the girl. Since his head was crushed, the broken pieces of meat and blood sprayed down incessantly onto her.

Having become completely bloodstained, the girl lost consciousness. If she were to wake up, she would likely be carrying one or two emotional traumas with her.

And as one would expect, treating such a young girl so poorly left a feeling of guilt within Zagan’s chest.

—C-Calm down. I’m a sorcerer. I can restore something of this level easily enough.

If all the remains of blood were gone, then the girl may end up forgetting it all as a bad dream.

As Zagan took a deep breath as if calming his nerves, he raised his index finger and began twirling it around.

“Surging Ring” After saying that aloud, a large circle stretched out on the ground. It was a magic circle delicately spun together with letters and figures. And as if reverting time, all the blood and meat splashed across the girl’s body was torn away from her and gathered on the sorcerer’s corpse. Of course, that also applied to the clotted blood clinging to Zagan’s hand.

This was sorcery. It was something used by drawing a magic circle. And within those, a sorcerer was able to manifest phenomena that ignored physical laws as they saw fit. By devising the construction and process of such things, the difference in individual power was made apparent.

There was also a method of omitting the labor of drawing a magic circle by speaking of its meaning with a spell, but in principle, the same thing was being done.

Although, this sorcery was only one which moved the location of an object, so the mass of meat which gathered at the stump where the head was missing immediately crumbled back to pieces.

But even so, the girl's body and torn clothes were returned to how they were before. Looking at her face once more, Zagan let out a deep sigh.

Quite a beauty huh? And then, he noticed that a single pendant was hanging down her neck.

"...A cross? Wow, is she from the church?" By church, he was referring to the apostles of the self-proclaimed god who held a grudge against sorcerers, as well as the Chivalric Order which carried out their justice.

Knight was originally a title that identified soldiers who devoted themselves loyally to a king, but they were unable to oppose the power of a sorcerer. However, the church had powers that could oppose sorcerers. Miracles of God, they said.

Those who proceeded to fight with sorcerers were not the knights who served royalty, but the Angelic Knights of the church. And before anyone knew it, the word knight ended up identifying only members of the church.

In other words, the church was the archenemy of sorcerers.

What do I do here...? I feel like they'll think I'm the culprit if I leave things alone...

For the time being, Zagan did in fact save this girl, but the other side would likely only see it as a falling out between fellow villainous sorcerers. Moreover, he ended up dousing her in a bloody shower.

Even if she were to wake up, it would probably be quite difficult to undo the misunderstanding. However, one way or another, killing the girl that he happened to save would leave him with a bad aftertaste.

"...Well, whatever." After worrying about it for a little, Zagan decided to just throw her out.

If he just abandoned her on the main road that stretched out next to the forest, then someone would likely find her. If by some chance a villain ended up finding her and caused her further harm, that just meant that she was unlucky. He had no obligation to look after her to such an extent.

Zagan lightly tapped his sole against the ground. And then, another magic

circle, different from the one before, was drawn out around the girl's body.

This was a magic circle of teleportation, which connected to the outside of Zagan's territory.

However, before the girl could be teleported, something came over from the other side of the magic circle.

"Tch?" Zagan's eyes shot open.

My magic circle... was hijacked? This was within Zagan's domain.

In preparation for intruders, Zagan had many magic circles prepared within his own castle and its surrounding land.

It was a barrier.

A barrier that informed him of the location of intruders. A barrier with the purpose of capturing said intruders. A barrier that dampened the powers of all sorcerers other than himself. And also, a barrier that fortified his own power.

In other words, anything and everything within it was Zagan's domain, where he reigned supreme.

And so, hijacking a magic circle within it was not a feat just any old sorcerer could accomplish. It was an intruder of extraordinary talent, and yet, Zagan's reaction was still carefree.

"Don't just use someone's magic circle as you please, Barbatos." What appeared was a tall, thin young man.

He looked to be around twenty years old, about two or three years older than Zagan himself and a fair bit taller. However, there was a deep shadow spread out around his eyes. Wearing a robe that extended into a hood around his head, he also had several amulets dangling from his neck.

Adding on the fact that he broke through the barrier, Zagan knew that this man possessed extraordinary power.

"Yo, Zagan. You've got quite the unhealthy look to you like always, I see."

"If we're talking about unhealthy looks, aren't you just the same, Barbatos?"

Among sorcerers, he was the one who would brazenly intrude into Zagan's

domain. And also, he was Zagan's one and only undesirable friend.

"Also, don't just use my magic circle as you please."

"If I don't do that, then I can't even teleport here, right?"

A sorcerer's power was, in short, magic circles. This man had made Zagan's magic circle his own, and was able to intrude into Zagan's domain. It was something far more difficult to do than it sounded.

Even though this domain was advantageous to Zagan, it was dubious whether he would be able to win against this man in a head on fight. He was just that kind of sorcerer.

Barbatos then gazed over the unconscious girl and the corpse spread out next to her, and squinted his eyes.

"What's this? Were you in the middle of a party?"

"All I did was dish out some light punishment to the villain who was frolicking in my garden."

"Heehee, like you can talk." Sorcerers were villains without exception. All that interested them was accumulating their own power, and they found little value in the lives of others or in any fortunes. If they found it necessary, they would harbor no guilt in stealing, either.

Even the reason Zagan saved the girl just now was not because of his virtue, but simply because he had no interest in what was going on.

Barbatos continued to stare at the girl.

"Hoo, this girl... she possesses quite a bit of mana, doesn't she? You gonna use her as a sacrifice or something?"

"It's not to my taste to use sorcery that requires sacrifices." Saying that, Zagan tapped the sole of his foot against the ground once more.

A faint light wrapped around the girl's body, and she vanished. This time, she should have been delivered to the outside of Zagan's domain.

"What a waste. You should've given her to me if you didn't want her."

"Don't go abducting people in my domain. I'll be treated as the culprit."

“Heehee, that sure sounds nice. Guess I’ll do just that next time.”

“...You go and do that, and I’ll blow up your base, got it?” This man was truly liable of doing just that, and Zagan scowled at him with a dangerous glint in his eyes.



However, even that was only for a few seconds, and Zagan let out a sleepy yawn.

“Hey, what’s that, you seem awfully drowsy.”

“I was absorbed in reading books on sorcery all night. I’m going to sleep. If you need something, come back later.”

“Wow, you don’t gotta care about something like drowsiness if you just fiddle with the adrenaline in your brain a bit, right? I came outta my way to visit you, so don’t say something so cold.”

“It’s precisely because you do that sort of thing that you look so unhealthy.” Sorcerers were those who devoted their entire lives to the research of sorcery and aimed to surpass humanity.

They lived precisely so that they could research sorcery. That was why sorcerers began by studying how to manipulate their own flesh and blood in depth. This wasn’t just something simple like augmenting their physical strength, however. It was the basics of sorcery to manipulate the insides of their own bodies at a cellular level. For that very reason, sorcerers were far removed from matters such as disease and life span.

After arriving at that stage, one was finally able to name themselves a sorcerer.

However, if they didn’t have any water or nourishment, then they would still starve and die. They were able to swindle the need for sleep, but they were unable to rid themselves of it entirely. And so, the result of that was the facial features that Barbatos possessed.

That was why Zagan didn’t touch upon such sorcery much.

Barbatos let out a laugh as if he found the notion strange.

“Don’t say that. I came by with an interesting story for you.” Despite putting on a wicked front, Barbatos placed his arm around Zagan in a friendly manner.

“An interesting story?” While forcing back the arm from his irritating friend, Zagan asked that question in return.

A smile then rose up on Barbatos’ skinny face.

“Damn straight. You know that one of the Archdemons, Marchosias, died just recently, right?” Hearing that name, Zagan’s eyes opened wide.

The term Archdemon did not refer to the king of monsters like something out of a fairy tale. Instead, it was a name given to the masters of sorcery who stood at its summit.

Along with that title, they were given a tremendous amount of mana, and were able to subdue lower-ranked sorcerers as their servants. This itself was the culmination of all power and authority that sorcerers desired.

Originally, there were thirteen ‘Archdemons,’ but one among them who was over a thousand years old finally breathed his last. Even though they used sorcery to extend their lifespan, it seemed that one thousand years was the absolute limit.

When it came to news of those Archdemons, even Zagan was unable to ignore it.

“Oh? What’s that? You’re making a face like you wanna hear more about it, you know? No, wait a sec. You said you wanted to sleep, right? Hmmm, though it’s unfortunate, I don’t really wanna incur your wrath here, you see.”

“Quit putting on airs and just tell me about it.”

“...Man, you’re the same unsociable ass as always.” After letting out a disconcerted sigh, Barbatos continued speaking.

“There’s a town called Kianoides, right? It was within Marchosias’ domain, and there’s a huge auction opening up there. Everything, from proper goods to the more illegal stuff, is being sold there.”

“You don’t mean...” The sound of Zagan gulp rang out.

“That’s exactly it! I’m sure it’ll show up. The legacy of the Archdemon, I mean.”

This sounds real shady, was the first thought to come to Zagan’s mind.

However, Archdemon Marchosias was over a thousand years old. Even if Barbatos plainly called it his legacy, it likely wasn’t limited to just one or two simple things. That was why one among those leaking out into an auction didn’t

seem out of the realm of possibility.

Barbatos then poked at Zagan with his elbow.

“So look, you should come too. If you’d like, I’ll let you pick out one or two women. Also, how do I put it... while we’re at it, it’d help me if you could provide a little assistance, you get me?” Saying that, Barbatos mimicked the shape of a coin with two of his fingers.

In other words, it seemed like he didn’t have the funds to participate in the auction.

And although he let out a sigh, Zagan did not turn him down.

“If that’s the case, I’ll be taking his legacy, you know?”

“Hey, seriously? I’m the one who told you about it.”

“If you don’t like it, try someone else.”

“There’s no way there’s another sorcerer out there who’d lend me the gold, right?” As Barbatos clung to him on the verge of tears, Zagan ended up following him along to the auction.

However, one thought crossed Zagan’s mind.

Women... right.

Zagan was also a man. It wasn’t like he had no interest in the female body.

In truth, the girl just now struck home entirely.

Nevertheless, rather than feeling the charm of the scene of normally waiting upon a woman, the impression of it being too troublesome was far more pronounced.

There was also the way of just treating them like a tool. But in that case he figured it would be better to just use a sorcery apparatus that accomplished the role it was given without any need to open one’s mouth.

It wasn’t like he had no desire to be loved, but thinking about how he had to get the other party to feel that way was also simply too troublesome.

Rather than the charms of the body, all the possible demerits produced by fulfilling that desire floated through his mind. That was why Zagan knew naught

of women to this very day.

More importantly, if humans aren't strong enough, they'll die right away too.

No matter what was done to a weak human, they couldn't complain.

If they wanted to protect themselves, they had to become strong.

That was why... Zagan became a sorcerer through sheer will by the young age of eighteen.

...Well, even if such an aloof sorcerer put on airs, his thoughts on the matter only held true up to this point.



Kianoides was a canal town.

With branches that extended out in all four directions of the continent, it was a town that owed its prosperity to the distribution of goods using boats that flowed along the canals. Not only merchandise, but even various races all gathered in this place.

Aside from just humans, there were the therianthrope who possessed fangs and fur like that of beasts. The avian who possessed wings on their backs. And the dwarves, who despite looking quite short and boorish, prided themselves on their finely detailed ornaments.

With each of those races flying their own coat of arms on their sailing vessels, even the wind blowing into the canal was unable to erase the scent of the soil from the hustle and bustle. In this country, it was one of the most flashy towns. It was even said that within a single day, over a million people would come and go.

And within that very town, there was a line of several people wearing collars around their necks with chains connected to them.

Slaves.

There were humans, as well as those from other races. The one leading them was also not necessarily a human. There was a dwarf beating a large human man with a cane, and there was also a beautiful avian woman abiding by them. There was even a therianthrope drinking milk out of a plate left on the ground

like a dog.

A portion of them were definitely being sold off at the auction as merchandise, so to speak.

The difference between those who were and weren't slaves was only at the level of the difference in wealth and power, or whether or not they had good or bad luck.

Because Zagan didn't want to end up like that, he desperately sought power. That was why feelings of sympathy did not swell up inside him.

Eventually, Zagan muttered something odd to himself.

"I feel... a strange tingling in the air." It was the atmosphere of the town.

This was not his first time coming to Kianoides, but Angelic Knights from the church were patrolling here and there. It also felt like the people of the town were afraid of something, and the air felt like it was filled with some sort of indignation, as if there was some presence there that normally was out of place.

Barbatos laughed out loud, as if he found it pleasant, upon hearing his words.

"Seems like some idiots out there have been gathering nothing but young women to use in experiments, you know?"

"As sacrifices? They're treading on quite the thin ice there, huh?" If one were to use a sacrifice, it was possible to manipulate sorcery that would not activate using their own power. As a catalyst for sorcery, it was quite common.

However, getting sacrifices like that required buying slaves or abducting waifs whose identities were completely unknown. At a minimum, there was a need to cover one's tracks.

Zagan couldn't understand the meaning of going out of the way to abduct common girls, while braving the dangers of catching the attention of the church. It was like they were picking a fight with the church itself.

Barbatos shrugged his shoulders faintly.

"Who knows? When you start restricting yourself to the day they were born, sometimes stuff like abducting women will come up, right?"

“Do they plan on summoning a demon or something?”

‘Demon’ was the name of a horned and winged monster that would come up in tales. It wasn’t definite whether something like that could actually be brought into existence, but there were traces that ‘something’ befitting of gods and devils existed in this world.

If such a thing were to be summoned, then a ritual like the one Barbatos was speaking of would be required. However, Zagan believed it to be nothing more than a wild dream.

As he made an exasperated expression, Barbatos continued to let out a pleasant laugh.

“That reminds me, Zagan, it seems you’re one of the suspects, you know?”

“How foolish. Sorcery that requires a sacrifice is useless at urgent moments, right?”

“Heehahaa, no kidding. Actually, there aren’t any weird companions who would go along with you anyway.” Having that said to him, Zagan unintentionally slumped his shoulders.

Well, it’s not like I need companions.

He was used to being lonely. He was used to it. And though they were talking of such things, the objective of these sorcerers was not sightseeing.

Barbatos guided Zagan to a place underneath the town. This underground location was an ancient ruin, likely an arena or something similar, that was left behind, and with a portion of it repaired, it was a place where dealings were done for goods that could not be sold on the surface.

The venue for the auction was in a portion of the arena itself. Using the circular setting as a stage, guest seating was lined up around it. It seemed that the auction had already begun, and the sound of several voices yelling out numbers was already resounding.

The only place that was illuminated was the stage, and not even candles were in place among the guest seats. That was not an unfriendly act, but rather one

done in consideration so that the guests couldn't see each other's faces.

...Well, not that it had much meaning to a sorcerer.

As they secured their own seats, Barbatos let out a whistle.

"Yo, take a look, Zagan. The 'Black Blade' Kimaris, and over there is the 'Enchantress' Gremory. Plus, we even have the 'Apparition' Valefor right over that way. With the lights still off, it was natural for any who named themselves a sorcerer to at least use sorcery so that their eyes would work in the darkness.

As Zagan looked in the directions that Barbatos was pointing out, he caught sight of several shadows clad in an extraordinary atmosphere.

Zagan was not acquainted to them, but they were all rather well-known sorcerers. Humans were the most common race, but among the ones present there were those from the other races. The Black Blade, Kimaris was a therianthrope with a proud mane. The Apparition, Valefor was hiding their entire body with a robe, hood, and mask, so their race was unknown.

Black Blade, and other such prefaces were the second names of the sorcerers. It could even be said to be their titles. It was something bestowed upon a sorcerer with a certain extent of power.

The most famous one was likely Archdemon Marchosias' second name, which was the 'Eldest.' Even Barbatos was known by the name 'Purgatory.'

Zagan was also a fairly well-known sorcerer, but he had yet to be bestowed with a second name.

Probably in part due to the fact that he was still young at eighteen years of age, but the bigger reason was that the one who oversaw all those in the area, Archdemon Marchosias, had passed away. It was the role of the Archdemon to bestow a second name, but he had perished before granting one to Zagan.

In short, a second name was proof of one's power.

Though they were strangers, Zagan was slightly interested in the sorcerers who possessed a second name.

"Are they strong?"

"Extremely. Like you and me, they're all names that come up as candidates to

be the next Archdemon.” Currently, due to Marchosias’ demise, there was a single open seat among the Archdemons.

There was a conference among the remaining Archdemons as to how to fill that seat, but it would likely be one among the recommended sorcerers who possessed power.

“Man, if even that lot came on over, then it seems the talk of the legacy is the real deal, huh?”

“Sure hope so.” If it wasn’t the case, there was no point in throwing aside his sleep.

And even while that was all going on, the auction was proceeding.

“To all of you who have gathered here today. The next item is the final item of the day, and it is also our greatest!” Listening to the host’s voice, Barbatos bent forward in excitement.

“Well, looks like it’s about time, Zagan.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t know for sure yet whether there really was something like an Archdemon’s legacy here, but it was now the moment where the showpiece was taking center stage.

And what eventually rose up to the stage... was a person of small stature with a hood covering their head. A mantle stretched down all the way to their feet, so even their race was unknown. They weren’t as small as a dwarf, but if they were of any other race, it would be the size of a child.

Now then, as for the legacy in question, was the hooded person holding onto it? As all present in the venue focused their attention on that figure, the host began explaining.

“What we have here, is merchandise that was originally to be delivered to Archdemon Marchosias. However, before it arrived, Marchosias perished, and so the undelivered merchandise in question has been sent to us, given the circumstances.” Hearing those words, Barbatos grimaced.

“So it’s not the legacy?”

“It’s probably one of his catalysts, then.”

There was more to invoking sorcery than just drawing a magic circle or chanting a spell. In fact, there were numerous occasions where tools were used too. From the ink used to draw the magic circle, to the ornaments donned by the sorcerer, or even using sacrifices to bolster the power of the sorcery.

Such tools were called catalysts, but the differing quality of them demonstrated a difference in power.

It was unfortunate that it wasn't the legacy, but Zagan's interest was pulled at the fact that it was a catalyst chosen by the 'Archdemon' himself.

Shortly after, the mantle was removed from the figure within his view. And what was revealed... was a lovely girl with pointy long ears.

He knew at a single glance. She was of the legendary race who lived in Norden, a land that nobody could ever step foot in. Yes, an elf.

She had snow-white hair that extended down to her waist, and a deep crimson ribbon that adorned it. She had a small face and large azure eyes that looked like the summer sky, and her lips were a moderately pale pink. A white dress was wrapped around her dainty limbs, and she had an appearance which made one think of a noble's daughter.

However, she had shackles around her hands and feet, and a collar that sealed mana placed around her neck.

Looking at that girl's eyes, Zagan felt his heart tremble. He felt the sensation of something running from the tips of his toes all the way to the top of his head.

Dark... and empty eyes.

They were eyes which reflected nothing, thought of nothing. They were those that belonged to one who had given up on everything in the future.

And yet, for some reason, Zagan was unable to avert his gaze from them.

"This is a member of the legendary race, an elf which was captured in Norden! Not only that, just as you can see, she has snow-white hair. It has not been dyed. This is an elf with naturally white hair!" Rather than people, elves were said to be closer to a type of god or spirit.

And regardless of the species, individuals with white hair were rogue

specimens, many of which possessed extraordinary amounts of mana.

Using a white-haired elf as a sacrifice would make it truly possible to attain power befitting of an 'Archdemon.'

As the host circled the elf, he scooped up her hair fluidly with his finger.

"Not only that, but even as a woman she is quite the sight, so other than being used as a sacrifice for sorcery, she has an exceedingly high value as a pet. Whether you tease her or chew on her, it is all up to your discretion, my dear customers!" The host then made a loud declaration.

"Without further ado, the bidding will start at ten thou—"

"One million." By the time he realized it, Zagan made that proclamation.

What is this violent beating in my chest?

Lovely... Was it fine to use that expression?

He wanted to save the elf girl who was standing there. He wanted to see her smile. And then, he wanted to touch her skin.

Such impulses that Zagan had never felt before were stirring up within him.

The venue had fallen completely silent. And then, with a creak, Barbatos spasmed as he looked over to Zagan.

"Th-The hell, Zagan...?"

"That's one million Curiothes gold coins." That was Zagan's entire fortune.

Eventually, the bewildered host got over his shock and raised his voice while wiping away the sweat on his brow with a handkerchief.

"Thank you very much! That is a rather magnificent sum of money! One million! Is there anyone who wishes to continue? Anyone at all?" Since sorcerers immersed themselves entirely in the research of sorcery, they had a strong tendency to accumulate wealth.

However no matter how much they accumulated, one million wasn't an amount that came up all too often. If it came to the possession of that amount, there were several who did, but if they used that up then they would be unable to continue their research. It was that high a number.

“Look, Zagan, what are you thinking? Even if it’s for an elf, throwing out that much money is a little...”

“There’s something I’ve always wanted, but I never knew what it was. And finally, I feel like I’ve found it.” Without knowing how to explain that sensation, Zagan was muttering as if in delirium.

However, looking at his eyes that were shining with a fiery blaze from the side, he appeared extremely evil. Though it was to be expected when he was being driven by his desire.

And as if frightened by that, Barbatos opened his eyes wide.

“You... The hell kind of sorcery are you planning on using...?” Barbatos seemed to be misunderstanding.

However, Zagan cleared the air by shaking his head.

“That’s not it. I may have bought her because of something other than sorcery. I can’t really describe it, but it’s something like that.”

“Are you saying, you’ll grasp a power on a different level from sorcery...?” It seemed the way Zagan explained it was a little wrong, and Barbatos began trembling in fear.

He realized that if he were to continue speaking, Barbatos’ misconceptions would only grow. And so, Zagan smiled as if saying there was a different meaning, but even that seemed to frighten Barbatos to death. It only resembled the smile of the devil.

With a thud, Barbatos sank to the floor. It was as if his spine had been removed.

Did he misunderstand again? As the rationalization to his undesirable friend was steadily drifting away, eventually, the sound of the wooden hammer declaring the winning bid rang out in the venue.

“Congratulations! The winning bid for the white-haired elf goes to the sorcerer, Zagan!” Zagan didn’t recall naming himself, but the host had correctly guessed his name upon seeing his face. It just showed how well-known he was in such circles, but none of that mattered.

As Zagan got up off his seat, he left behind Barbatos, who had sunken down to the floor, and invoked flight sorcery.

Leaping over the spectator seats, he landed gently atop the stage.

He stood before the girl, but she only continued to look downward without raising her face.

What do I do? How should I call out to her? It was fine to so vigorously leap forth, but he hadn't spared a single thought about what to do next.

And as he was suddenly perplexed, the host began talking to him in a coaxing voice.

"Please hand over the payment. She is a lucky elf to have the winning bid go to the renowned sorcerer Zagan, isn't she? By the way, the dress and the mana sealing collar are free gifts. If you ever remove the collar, there is a risk that she will run away, so please do be careful."

"Yeah." Zagan wasn't actually listening to what the host had to say, but he just gave a noncommittal agreeable response regardless.

Will she at least look at me? No, I guess she's scared after all. Rather, she hasn't gone through a bitter experience or anything, right? Since she was such a beautiful girl, there were likely many repulsive experiences that she could have gone through. There was also the case of the girl in the morning too, which drove Zagan's thought to rather horrendous places.

Filled with anxiety, Zagan stretched out his hand to the girl's chin.

She had skin that was smooth like silk. Zagan now understood the unease of whether he would leave a wound just by touching her.

Nevertheless, he tried touching her as gently as he could, and tilted the girl's face slightly upward.

Those hollow eyes gazed at Zagan.

A sigh involuntarily leaked out of Zagan's lips. As expected, she was a lovely girl.

However, she didn't seem to be focusing. It was suspicious whether or not she could even see Zagan. No, before that, he couldn't even sense anything like

a will within her.

Is she alright? She's not being manipulated or something, right? Sorcery that tore away and stole one's will wasn't all that strange.

And as Zagan turned pale, the host let out a nervous voice.

"Master Zagan? Is there something... that you find fault with?"

"...Well, does she have her own will?" What leaked out of his twitching throat, rather than an anxious voice, was a bad tempered one. It was to the point where he felt like asking himself what angered him to such an extent.

However, the host nodded as if he came to an understanding.

"Please do be at ease. This elf was docile upon her capture, and was kept in custody in her natural state. In the first place, the mana of the specimen is tremendously high, and any ordinary sorcery would be useless on her. As such, I myself can guarantee her freshness."

In the case of using her as a sacrifice, if she was brainwashed using sorcery, then it would cause an impurity in the ritual and lower its potency. The host likely thought this was the point that Zagan was worried about.

However, looking at the elf girl who was gaudily dressed up like a noble lady, she didn't appear to have any wounds. Even if she was being treated as a slave, the management behind the auction was not foolish enough to leave a wound on such valuable 'merchandise.' It seemed it was fine to trust them at their word.

Zagan finally let out a sigh of relief.

"I shall trust you. I would be troubled if she is unable to at least chirp in a good voice." For the time being, he tried to speak in a way to make his intentions clear... but it came across in a rather pretentious, and frankly dangerous, manner.

The host then shrank back with a pale face.

He also felt like the elf girl twitched as she trembled in fear.

Ah, good. It seems she can hear what I'm saying, at least.

Finding peace of mind in that fact, Zagan was unable to understand just how misleading the things he had been saying were.

This was the very first love of the man who was thinking mere hours ago that 'women are just tiresome.'

Chapter II: The First Love of Someone With a Communication Disorder is Similar to the Taste of Moldy Bread

And so, back to the present.

After finishing his payment without a hitch, Zagan felt fine up until he returned to his castle. However, after not knowing how to talk to her and worrying endlessly for half an hour, the first thing that the girl said aloud was—

“Just how... will you be... killing me?”

With a voice that sounded like a chime, she said such a thing — and he had no time to immerse himself in its lingering memory.

The shackles around her hand and feet were removed, but the collar which sealed her mana was still attached around her neck.

He wanted to remove that as well, but even for Zagan it wasn't something that could be so easily unfastened. It seemed the auction's host also did not know the way to remove it, and there wasn't anything like a key, either.

It was likely a relic of the original buyer, Archdemon Marchosias. The only option was to spend time investigating the collar.

It didn't show in her facial expression, but the girl appealed to Zagan in a depressed tone.

“If I know the manner in which I'll die, I think I can muster my resolve... a little.” Her expressionless face didn't appear to be something that came from tension, but was because she had clearly resigned herself.

Zagan then raised his voice in a fluster.

“Wait, wait, wait! I don't intend to kill you. Rather, it'd be troublesome if you're not alive!” He said that to try and reassure her, but for some reason her expression seemed to have clouded over even more than before.

“In other words, you won’t allow me to find rest in death... you mean?” The girl was looking up at the chains dangling from the ceiling, as well as the skeleton stuck up there, when she said that.

Cold sweat ran down her cheek.

That’s wrong. It was troublesome to tidy it up when I was using sorcery here, so I just ended up leaving it where it was! This castle was originally the dwelling of another sorcerer.

The fortune used to make the winning bid on this girl was also something that sorcerer left behind. Strictly speaking, it wasn’t something that Zagan had in stock.

However, for better or worse, the former owner was a stereotypical sorcerer, and within the castle they had torture devices, sorcery apparatuses, and even skeletons scattered around all over. The bones hanging from the ceiling were also not to Zagan’s tastes, but even if he said that aloud, he likely had no chance of persuading her.

Though she was practically frightened to death, Zagan spoke as if to smooth the situation over calmly.

“Be at ease. I have no intention of using such disturbing things on you. I don’t plan on tormenting you, either. There is not a single thing... for you to be afraid of.” He wasn’t able to say it in all that gentle a voice, but considering it was Zagan, he thought that he managed to convey what he wanted to say... Whether or not she’d been convinced was an entirely different story, though.

And perhaps as expected, the girl tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“Huh...? Then, why did you... buy me?”

“Well, that’s...” It was an obvious doubt.

However, because of Zagan’s personality, there was no way he could say that it was because he fell in love at first sight.

What exactly am I supposed to do at times like these? I should’ve asked Barbatos...

Zagan left him behind at the auction venue, but for some reason he didn’t

follow.

Barbatos didn't appear to have an abundance of experience with women himself, but even so, it was at least at the level where he could naturally say 'women of your choosing.' At the very least, he likely knew more about dealing with women than Zagan, or so he figured.

Zagan let out a groan as if driven into a corner, and what rushed out of his mouth were the following words.

"There is no need for you to know."

What the hell am I saying!? He was shrieking within his heart.

However, unexpectedly, the girl's expression did not change. She did appear to be slightly dejected, but it was only at a meager level.

Isn't this calmness... a little strange? It may just have been that expressions didn't really show on her face, but before this he felt like the girl looked to have given up on everything.

After being captured, he heard that she had nothing done to her body, but what exactly happened to her...?

"You..." He tried to speak to her, but Zagan then realized that he didn't even know her name.

Which means she likely also knows nothing about me huh?

And finally, he felt like he grasped the thread to begin a conversation.

"My name is Zagan. Just as you can see, I'm a sorcerer, but it's not really my hobby to torture people."

"Yes."

"And so, what about..." Even though he just wanted to ask her name, Zagan was unable to speak any further.

You idiot...! I'm just asking for her name! Why do I become so nervous just from being conscious that she's a girl! Zagan already possessed much power as a sorcerer.

And despite that, he was searching for courage as if he was challenging

certain death with no chance of victory.

Courage was a word that was completely unrelated to him.

However, if he didn't make his stand, he wouldn't be able to make a single bit of progress here.

"What's your—" And as he opened his mouth, the girl raised her voice with an 'Ah.'

"Excuse me... for saying it so late. I am called... Nephelia." A warm feeling blew through Zagan's chest like a refreshing wind.

It seemed that she was able to guess what Zagan was trying to say. It made him think that she was a fantastic and attentive girl.

"Nephelia... Huh?" He felt like he could hear the echo repeat itself many times over.

Within legends, the word Nephilim meant 'one who has fallen from heaven.' It evoked that sort of mental image. He found it to be a mystical and beautiful word, and her name was very reminiscent of it.

Just like her appearance, it's a lovely name.

Simply learning her name made Zagan feel like he was soaring. He bitterly came to an understanding of the meaning behind the words 'love brings man to ruin.'

He was already in a state where he could be described as high. If one remained in such an abnormal mental condition, no matter how outstanding the person, they would likely fall to ruin.

Wait, is Nephelia her first name or her family name?

Straining his face that had softened up, Zagan cut forth with his question.

"Nephelia... what, exactly?"

"Just Nephelia. I have no family name. If it is difficult to say, you may just call me Nephy."

"Is that okay!?"

"Yes?" The name Nephelia had a beautiful ring to it, but her nickname Nephy

was also adorable.

Zagan unintentionally raised his voice, and the girl, Nephy, tilted her head to the side.

Rather, having no family name is just the same as me... By the time he was aware of his surroundings, Zagan was performing highway robbery to amass rubbish.

Forget a family name, he didn't know his parents' faces. The name Zagan was slang from the city slums, and it was something attached to him as he grew to be seen as something akin to the devil.

Thinking back on it, that was the most enjoyable time of my life. I properly spoke to my fellow highwaymen and the people of the town then. And even though I was beaten black and blue many times over, it was somehow fulfilling.

He committed vile crimes, but he was still in a place where the sun shined. And naturally, he was able to talk to girls too. If there was a sunny spot in Zagan's memories, then it was that period.

Realizing Nephy was staring at him in puzzlement, Zagan shook his head.

"For an elf, um, is that common? Not having a family name, I mean."

"No. It is because I am a cursed child."

"A cursed child...?" Having heard a rather inexcusable term, Zagan knit his brows.

Nephy then pinned down her mouth as if she made a slip of the tongue.

"Um... Why are you asking about such a thing?"

"No reason, I'm just a little curious is all..." Zagan hesitated to say that he didn't only want to know her name and the meaning of cursed child, but else everything about her as well. And after Nephy nodded as if she came to an understanding, for some reason she pulled up at the hems at the front of her skirt.

Her milky thighs were exposed, and Zagan could even catch a glimpse of the delicately woven lace of her shorts.

“Do be at ease. I am a virgin.” Zagan was conscious that his face was reddening.

“D-Do you understand just what it is you’re saying?”

“Oh...? I am told that a virgin has more mana. Were you not talking about whether my value as experimental material was damaged?”

“Don’t misunderstand. I don’t have any intention of using you in experiments or torturing you.” Nephy made a face like she was even more confused than before.

“Then, why did you buy me?”

“...” Zagan pinned down his brow and kept silent.

“There is no need for you to know that.” Then, he once more repeated the same words as before.

Or rather, he couldn’t answer her. No matter who it was or how they heard of it, if they were told that Zagan purchased a slave at a dark auction after falling in love with her at first sight, they would think that he was a pervert. If Nephy looked at him with eyes like that, Zagan would be unable to recover. Even if sorcerers had perpetual youth, it was entirely possible to consider death due to shock.

Having said that, if I don’t answer at all, then Nephy’d feel anxious too, huh?

So just what was he to do? Would it have been better to just send her back home for the day...?

No, in the first place, does she have somewhere to return to? Earlier, she called herself a cursed child. She spoke out with a turbulent expression on her face, and he didn’t think he was going to be able to ask her about it. Zagan himself also had nowhere else to return to, and he felt the same presence from her.

Of course, if she wanted to go back to her birthplace, then he wanted to help her, but it didn’t seem like an atmosphere where he was able to rashly ask her that.

In which case, since Zagan had purchased her, it would mean that on the

surface, they would end up living here together, but...

Wait, living together? He, who was even now unable to properly say anything, was supposed to live under the same roof as this adorable girl? Zagan was struck by a slight wave of dizziness.

What outrageous situation had he gotten himself into?

It was true that he was actually happy about it, but for some reason he felt like he had done something he shouldn't have.

Calm down. I'm a sorcerer. A powerful sorcerer does not fluster.

It wasn't like they were going to be sleeping in the same bed. First came thinking about what was needed to live... together.

Zagan sat up from his throne, then stood before Nephy.

"Nephy."

"Yes." He tried calling her name face to face, and a strange sense of embarrassment filled his heart.

But even so, he didn't falter, and Zagan addressed her.

"Hear me, Nephy. You are something I bought, and you therefore belong to me."

"Yes."

"So for now, I shall grant you a room. It is fine for you to choose whichever one you like."

"In other words, you're telling me to choose the place I die?"

"Did I not say earlier that I will not be killing you?" Having finally raised her voice in grief, Nephy then cast her eyes downward as if she was troubled.

"I do not understand... the meaning to that. Just how will you be using me... in a way that I will not die?"

Surely, ever since she was captured by humans, she had been tortured by thoughts of her eventual fate. Due to that, she most likely no longer even believed in hope.

In truth, Zagan was also familiar with such feelings.

It was about the time that he was doing highway robbery while scurrying for scraps of food in the garbage of the slums.

Back then, what was it again that I wanted to hear...?

Even back then, he surely didn't know the answer to that. Nevertheless, Zagan slowly stretched out his hand to Nephy's hair.

He felt her snow-white hair with the palm of his hand. He knew that Nephy's body twitched and trembled.

And just like that, while making sure not to put any strength in his hand, Zagan muttered something.

"I bought you... because I need you. So don't just keep saying die, die, die like that." Nephy opened her eyes wide and looked up at Zagan's face.

She was surprised.

This was the very first time that he saw anything like an expression on her face.

"You... need... me?" It was somehow embarrassing, but he felt like he had to clearly convey that to her.

"Yeah, I need you. That's why, from now on, you'll live for my sake."

"...Yes." As usual, Nephy's expression didn't budge in the slightest, but she didn't show any signs of doubting Zagan's words either.

It likely wasn't the case that she believed everything that Zagan had to say. But even so, she didn't utter another word about lamenting her death.

This was the beginning of a long cohabitation between two awkward individuals.



"Now then, about the room you'll be using..." He was wondering where would be good.

Nephy was captured as a slave. She surely went through painful emotions. Rather than somewhere underground or any dark place, a room with a

beautiful view would be better.

In that case, the spire at the very top of the castle was most appropriate. When it came to the view, that was the absolute best spot. And as he was guiding her there, he suddenly realized something.

“Nephy, are you fine with high places?” For once, he felt like he asked her something fairly naturally.

And without making any sort of expression, Nephy nodded once deeply.

“Yes. Hang me by my hands or neck, whichever you prefer.”

“Who said anything about torture, I wonder?”

“My... apologies. When I heard you speaking of high places, nothing else came to mind.” As Nephy stared blankly at him, Zagan put his palm to his head.

Have a little more hope in living here...

If it was like this, maybe a room in a high place was a problem. He didn't think it was possible, but the danger that Nephy would throw herself off the balcony crossed his mind.

Still, they continued up the spiral staircase, and headed toward the top floor.

It seemed that the light outside had already darkened.

Zagan snapped his fingers, and the candles lined along the wall all lit up at once.

“This way.”

“Yes... Ah.” As Zagan began ascending the staircase once more, Nephy let out a small shriek as she staggered.

The flickering flames from the candles were a little unreliable as a light source. Their footholds were dark, and with the tapered heels of Nephy's shoes, it seemed that it was difficult for her to walk.

Zagan then suddenly took her hand and supported her.

“My... apologies...” The face of the girl who said that was close enough that it felt like his nose would touch hers.

A faint sweet smell tickled Zagan's nose.

He peered straight into her azure eyes, which were bordered by white eyelashes.

He was completely charmed by her, and at the same time he was nauseated by an extreme sense of embarrassment. And, as if trying to gloss it over, Zagan let out a snort with a 'hmph.'

"B-Be careful. Pay attention to where you're walking."

"Y-Yes..." And he ended up speaking in a harsh tone. It appeared to him like Nephy was somehow faltering.

And just like that, as they continued to ascend the spiral staircase, Zagan noticed the tender sensation within his hand.

Hm? Could it be... that I'm holding Nephy's hand? He grasped her hand when he supported her. And after that he ended up just nonchalantly holding it.

Zagan didn't think it was his first time holding a girl's hand, but trying to recall another instance in his memory proved to be difficult... In the end, it may in fact have been his first time.

Her white hand was slender, soft, and warm. From the palm of his hand, he could sense a palpitation. It may have just been his own, though.

Unexpectedly, Nephy continued to stare at that hand as she remained silent.

Zagan was nauseated by an inexplicable sense of shyness, but he also didn't want to let go of her hand.

While switching between a quick pace and a slow one, Zagan reached the top of the castle.

Finally, after climbing three stories, the door at the top floor came into sight.

He was slightly worried about the difficulty of her having to go up and down if he made this Nephy's room, but for the time being he put his hand against the door.

"This is a room that is not usually used. It may be... somewhat dirty, but..."
Saying that, the fundamental question of 'Have I even ever entered this room

before?' came to Zagan's mind.

It had been about ten years since he began living here, but usually he would just seclude himself in the archives, so he was a proprietor who did not actually grasp the entire interior of his own castle.

And then, he regretted not properly verifying that doubt in his mind.

In this room where a refreshing wind blew, the blade of a guillotine made a sound as it swayed in the air.

Other than that, there were skeletons that had been neglected after many years, and vials containing mysterious things within them scattered about. With the aid of the gloomy light from the candles, it was the absolute worst and most creepy location.



“Let’s not use this place.” He immediately began shutting the door, but it was a little too late.

After all, people felt the greatest sense of despair upon having their faintest hopes dashed.

Just after saying he needed her, torture devices were thrust before her, so the light in Nephy’s eyes vanished.

The girl threw open both her arms as if she was throwing everything away.

“Please... do as you will, Master.”

“You’re wrong, you hear? This is, well... Oh, yeah! It’s a trap prepared for enemies who would invade from the skies.” Having said that, even Zagan thought it was quite the lame excuse.

“But well, how do I put it. It’s quite the useless setup, and things like this would just get in the way. So I’ll dispose of them.”

Saying that, Zagan threw lightning sorcery into the room with the dangling guillotine blade, and once more shut the door.

Immediately following that, the sound of an explosion burst out.

The shockwave leaked out through the gap in the door, making Nephy’s snow-white hair flutter gently. And while Zagan was captivated by that, the door collapsed with a thud into the room.

It seemed even the hinges had crumbled to pieces.

And so, all traces of repulsive objects had utterly and completely vanished from within the room...

Well, the ceiling was burnt black, and it was disputable whether it would function as living quarters anymore. Even the candles had been blown away.

And just then, a cold sweat ran down Zagan’s cheek.

I-I meant to remove the source of her fears here.

And as he turned to look at the terribly frightened Nephy, he noticed that she had grown even more pale. Eventually, her trembling lips opened.

“That is the first time... I’ve seen such devastating sorcery...”

Well, I guess it’d be awfully scary if offensive sorcery was just suddenly let loose like that, right!? Moreover, even viewed conservatively, it had enough destructive force to reduce an average sorcerer to ashes three times over. There likely wasn’t any ordinary person out there who wouldn’t be shaken upon witnessing it.

That’s wrong. All because Barbatos is the only person I’ve really had normal conversations, I...

He went and fixed the problem using the common sense shared between fellow sorcerers.

Thinking that it couldn’t be helped either way, Zagan turned his back to the room.

“...Mhm. This place is no good. It’s too dreary.”

“Is this... what you would call dreary?” The girl tilted her head to the side like a little songbird, and Zagan couldn’t say anything back to her.

Nephy then took a step into the room.

As she walked, ashes fluttered up into the air. The window had no glass, and rather than a room, it was probably more fitting to call it a birdcage or something. Though it wasn’t too extreme, it wasn’t the kind of place that a girl should tread.

Even so, Nephy didn’t seem to pay that any mind and continued walking toward the terrace.

I should... set up a barrier to prevent her from falling over the edge, right?

He didn’t truly believe that Nephy would throw herself off the terrace, but Zagan threw out his sorcery anyways. In the worst case, it was possible to believe that it would simply collapse.

And to be ready for that unlikely event, Zagan lined himself up next to Nephy.

The terrace had a handrail made of stone bricks, so he felt it wouldn’t be strange if it were to crack and crumble to pieces.

Putting her hands atop the handrail, Nephy looked up at the sky.

It was now night, and the clouds had somewhat cleared up. A thin line of moonlight came down like a thread.

Looking up, Nephy stretched out both her hands toward the sky. Even though it was such a casual gesture, Zagan felt like it appeared to be some sort of sacred ritual.

“Do you... like the moon?”

“...I don’t know.” Nephy shook her head as if she was troubled as she answered Zagan’s question.

“Then, what meaning is there in that gesture?”

“...I don’t know.” And now she was only saying that she didn’t know.

However, Nephy’s eyes as she gazed at the moon looked to be mixed with a heartrending sense of nostalgia. And, for no particular reason, Zagan imitated her and stretched out his hands.

“I can’t really grasp anything, huh?”

“...I believe that’s the case.” Zagan felt like dying from embarrassment as he heard her reply in a serious manner.

Why was it that at such times he couldn’t think of anything sensible to say?

And then, Nephy muttered.

“Is it alright... for me to... receive this room?” It was the first time Nephy spoke on her own.

However, Zagan turned around to look into the dreadful room.

The dangerous articles had certainly vanished, but there also wasn’t a single thing left, not even a glass window. It didn’t look like a space that someone could live in.

If I use sorcery to restore it, then even the guillotine will come back...

The cleaning and decoration would just have to be done by regular effort.

“Maybe a more proper room would be...” And as he started to say that, he

recalled that all the rooms were much the same.

Even if there weren't any torture devices, there were ominous sorcery apparatuses lying about. In the end, none of them were rooms that a normal girl should use.

And, as that fact troubled him, Zagan spoke up once more.

"Are you fine with a place like this?"

"Yes. It is the room that you've prepared for me after all, Master." All he did was fire offensive sorcery to reduce everything in the room to ashes. Zagan didn't really think that could be described as having prepared the room...

However, since he couldn't help but tilt his head to the side as he wondered if any other room would actually be better, Zagan nodded back to her.

"Very well. Then use this place as you see fit." On the spur of the moment, he ended up speaking in an exaggerated fashion yet again, but Nephy bowed her head down with a bob and said the following.

"Thank you very much, Master." And, for some reason, that single phrase pierced through Zagan's chest.

Nephy then tilted her head to the side.

"Is something the matter?"

"...No, it's just been quite the long time... since anybody's said that to me." There were times now and then where he let people who had gotten lost in the castle go without killing them, but Zagan was not a good person by nature.

In most cases, they would run away at full force and would not offer a single word of gratitude.

However, Nephy didn't seem to find that curious at all, and nodded as if she was fully convinced.

"I also feel like... it has been a long time since I said that."

"I see..." Zagan wondered if the day would come where he would also say thank you to someone.

Opening his heart up to others was still something that was far off, but he was

honestly happy that she was now listening to what he had to say properly.

And so, their first day together concluded peacefully.



The next morning.

Since the room Zagan granted Nephy on the top floor of the castle couldn't possibly be used yet, the two of them slept in the throne room.

Actually, I couldn't get a wink of sleep.

Zagan also didn't get any sleep the day before. He thought he was going to be able to fall asleep right away, but simply thinking about how Nephy was right next to him kept him wide awake. It wasn't like he had the guts to really do anything anyways, but despite that, just thinking about how she would end up hating him if he did kept him from doing so.

On the other hand, Nephy was probably quite tired after all.

After curling up on the carpet, she fell asleep right away.

However, that was also one of the reasons Zagan was unable to fall asleep. Having such a defenseless figure exposed to him, it was impossible for him to not have her on his mind.

In the dead of the night, Nephy seemed to be cold, and in lieu of a blanket, he covered her with his mantle. However, that may have been a poor decision on his part. For some reason, thinking of that lovely girl wearing his mantle made Zagan's heart pound even harder.

And while he was worrying endlessly, by the time he realized it, the morning sun had ascended.

His stomach then let out a hearty and pathetic sound.

"...Guess I'll get something to eat." After Zagan descended into the cellar storehouse, he carried out two portions of the dried meat and milk he had stored down there. He didn't know when Nephy would wake up, but he wanted to be prepared so that she could have breakfast right away.

When he returned to the throne room, Nephy was already wide awake and

waiting for him, sitting on her knees. The mantle that he had covered her with was neatly folded to the side. For whatever reason, it now seemed wasteful to put it on again.

“So you’re awake.”

“Yes. Good morning, Master.” Zagan almost unintentionally broke into a smile.

So she’ll greet me properly.

And though he tried to reply, the thought ‘Hm? After being told good morning, what was it you were supposed to reply with again?’ left him completely perplexed.

Was it fine to just say good morning back? Or was he supposed to say hello? Good day to you was definitely wrong, at least, or so he thought.

When he thought about it, just how many years had it been since he had such an upright greeting directed at him?

And while Zagan was writhing in agony, Nephy stared at him with a dumbfounded look.

Seeing that, he cleared out his throat with a cough.

“I brought you a meal. Go ahead and eat.” After saying that, Zagan was somehow repulsed by himself.

So I can’t even greet her properly...? When had he become such a hopeless person?

...Thinking back on it, he felt like he may have been hopeless from the very beginning.

Even as she gazed at Zagan curiously while he was in anguish, Nephy obediently received the dried meat and cup of milk from him.

“Thank you very much, Master.”

“... Mm.” As Zagan felt dejected at his own spinelessness, Nephy timidly looked up at him.

“Master.”

“What?”

“What... should I be doing?”

“Hmm, let’s see...” Even though one evening passed, he still hadn’t thought of what he should have Nephy do.

Should I have her do some cleaning or something? However, just yesterday, taking a peek into a single room was quite the catastrophic event.

Within this castle, there were nearly fifty messy rooms like that, and more importantly, Zagan had never once cleaned a single one of them. It wasn’t something that could be done by one person, and somehow he felt that if he ordered her, this girl would see it through to the end.

In the first place, Zagan didn’t fuss over aesthetics, and despite having no interest in it, didn’t want to make her do anything that would drive her to death.

However, in that case, just what could he have her do?

She’ll probably be anxious if she has nothing to do too huh...?

This girl was given the idea that she was going to be a sacrifice or a lab animal. So if the man who bought her simply told her to stay put, he didn’t think she would be pleased and think ‘Ah, it’s nice to not to have to do anything.’

While groaning, Zagan was unable to come up with an answer, so he set his cup of milk on the floor and began chewing on the dried meat.

Nephy then made a face like she found this unexpected.

“Master, are you also eating the same thing?”

“Yeah...? Is something strange about that?”

“No, um...” It seemed like she had something she wanted to say, but Nephy’s gaze was wandering around like she found it difficult to put in words.

“Just speak. You won’t particularly anger me.” While Zagan cursed himself for being unable to put it in a slightly more friendly manner, he somehow managed to say that.

Nephy maintained her unchanging expression, and opened her mouth as if it

was difficult to say.

“I feel... privileged from just having received a meal. However, Master, I find it strange for you to be eating the same things...” In her own way, she made her best effort to voice her doubts.

Zagan then folded his arms and thought about it. Just what was it that Nephy found so odd? The only thing in front of his eyes was a dirty cup filled with milk, and dried meat from god knows how long ago.

Hm? Now that I think of it, there was a group eating similar things in town yesterday too.

Yes. If he remembered correctly, it was the slaves in Kianoides.

Seeing them in the middle of the streets was quite pitiful, but when he thought of it carefully, Zagan was eating something similar himself.

And after nodding to himself, Zagan opened his mouth to speak.

“Could it be... because this is too modest a meal?”

“Um, yes... I believe it to be food fit for a slave like myself.” In other words, rather than a meal, it was slop.

However, rather than taking offense to that, Zagan was genuinely lamenting it. Or actually—

Is she... worried about me? No, that may have been a little wrong.

It wasn't like she was going to suddenly open her heart after just yesterday and today.

It wasn't that, but it was like she couldn't stand by and watch no matter who it was. It felt almost like she was saying ‘Won't this person die if I don't do something about this?’

Zagan gnawed away for a while, and then gazed at the shriveled dry meat.

Aaah, that's right. This food's at the level where you can't really even call it a meal.

Ever since his days as a highwayman, this was the only kind of thing he had to eat, so he never thought about it even once. He was at the point where as long

as he didn't starve, it didn't matter what the food was.

Other than dried meat, he also ate hardened bread, but that got moldy too quickly and would no longer be edible. He'd previously tried to forcefully eat it anyway, but after that he experienced nothing but a stomach ache and tragic memories.

Looking back at how I've been getting nowhere since yesterday, I can recall the taste of the bread, huh?

He had heard before that a first love tasted like lemons, but in reality it was more of a sour feeling that seemed to tear apart his stomach.

If he had to name one thing that he honestly found delicious, it would be liquor. The liquor that Barbatos brought over while talking like an idiot was truly delicious, but at that time the main dish was also dried meat.

When it came to alcohol, Zagan didn't know which was better to buy, so in the end his life of dried meat and milk had simply continued.

"What does... a normal person eat, I wonder...?" As he involuntarily mumbled that, Nephy opened her mouth as if she made up her mind.

"Um, Master."

"What?"

After taking a small yet deep breath, Nephy said the following.

"Though it may be impertinent of me, shall I... cook something for you?" Zagan shot to his feet with a clatter.

He then grasped Nephy's hand as she shrank back in a startled manner.

"You can cook?"

"I have only learned by watching, so I cannot guarantee the taste, but..." How skillful of her.

Home cooking... Not only that, it was being made by the girl he had fallen in love with. To Zagan, this had never been an option before.

Now that I think about it, among the three grand desires of man, one's the appetite for food...

All he did was research sorcery, so he never thought of satisfying that sort of desire.

The contours of his eyes became hot.

Was that feeling swelling up in his eyes tears? It was a shocking revelation to Zagan that such a thing actually still remained within him.

Following that, he downed his milk in one gulp.

“Phew, hear me, Nephy. I have decided what you are to do.”

“Yes. What is it?”

“Go shopping!” Within this castle, there were no ingredients other than dried meat and old milk. Even Zagan knew that making anything delicious was impossible with just those.

“...Ah, yes.” Nephy responded as if she was taken aback, blankly staring up at Zagan all the while. Then, she applauded lightly.

She may have just thought that she had to react in some way, but it was a rather embarrassing sight.



The largest town in the vicinity was certainly Kianoides, but there were several other small villages and settlements close to the abandoned castle.

Zagan was headed toward one of them, but upon leaving the castle, he quickly realized that there was a problem.

Thinking about it carefully, I spent my entire fortune on Nephy, huh?

He was undoubtedly penniless.

At the time, he was stirred up by the voice in his heart, so he hadn't spared a single thought of what was to come afterward.

Since Kianoides was a trade city, it had well maintained highways that stretched out to various places. Towns were dotted along these roads, and it was normal to use carriages to travel between them. If one were to walk down the road, they would be able to at least catch a stagecoach fairly quickly.

However, Zagan finally realized that he possessed no money to board such a

carriage.

“Not getting on?” The coachman, a young male therianthrope with the face of a cat, tilted his head to the side, and Zagan shook his head in response.

“Aaah, it seems I forgot something. Go on without me.”

“That so?” The clattering of the carriage’s wheels rang out as it departed.

As Zagan saw off the carriage in vain, Nephy tilted her head to the side behind him.

“Are we returning to the castle?”

“No, there’s no need for that.”

“Is that so...?” Even if he returned to the castle, there wasn’t a single copper coin left. It may have been possible for him to sell off some of those torture devices, but it would also cost quite a bit to call over a merchant who was capable of evaluating them and making the transaction.

Actually, Nephy also needs something to wear.

Ever since the previous night, this girl had been wearing the same white dress. Moreover, since the castle was filthy, it had become sullied.

To do something or other about that, it was necessary to procure money.

And as if glossing that over, Zagan muttered with a solemn expression.

“It has been quite a while since I’ve been out at this time. It isn’t bad to take a walk every now and then.”

“Yes.” While making a lame excuse, Zagan began walking in the direction that the carriage headed, and Nephy followed suit.

As he took a fleeting glimpse behind him, he noticed that Nephy was lifting the hems of her skirt and jogging. There was the fact that their strides were different, but he figured the struggle was mostly because she found it hard to walk with that dress and those shoes. And so, Zagan kept that in mind and walked at a leisurely pace.

While walking, Zagan began to worry himself. *Would it be fine to just attack the carriage from earlier and take all their money and goods?* Lately he hadn’t

really been doing it, but back in the day that was basically how he fed himself.

However, just last night he ended up frightening Nephy with his offensive sorcery.

Rather, just what would that girl think about while watching a man rob innocents? *In the end, I feel like stealing's no good.*

However, in that case, just how would he earn money?

Anyway, just as Zagan was thinking that since Nephy could cook he should sell his castle and open a restaurant in town... a scream came from further down the highway.

Nephy gulped.

"Master."

"Hm? Oh, it's probably a robbery. Bandits show up in this area once in a while." Off in the distance, men carrying axes were assaulting a carriage.

There was about a dozen or so armed men. It was a band of brigands who were harmless to man and beast.

They weren't sorcerers, just simple people. None of them received training like Angelic Knights, and they didn't wear troublesome armor like the Archangels, either. They were just ordinary folk who were running amok, wielding easy to understand edged tools.

That was about all there was to Zagan's perception of them.

The passengers were being pulled down out of the carriage, and the bandits were stealing all the money and goods. It seemed they were intent on taking a young woman along with them, as they were pulling her over to another carriage. They likely either intended to sell her into slavery or use her as a plaything. In either case, that woman's fate was sealed.

Zagan at least thought that the abducted girl was pitiful, but he himself had done similar things before. He didn't think it was all that wretched a scene.

While he was gazing at the scene like it didn't concern him at all, he eventually realized that Nephy was trembling in place.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing...” The person in question pretended to be calm, but her face was completely pale and her lips were trembling. In fact, it seemed like she couldn’t take her eyes off the scene unfolding before them.

Zagan was taken aback.

Could it be that Nephy was also abducted like that? It wasn’t like Nephy was captured by slave dealers from the very beginning. She should have been living a peaceful life somewhere before that. This may have reminded her of a painful memory.

Zagan then pointed his finger at the bandits.

“Nephy, take a good look. Those things are just rubbish.”

“...Yes.” Her voice sounded somehow dejected.

He didn’t know what she was discouraged by, but Zagan gathered his mana into the finger he had extended.

Immediately following that, a single line of lightning shot out like an arrow.

“Kyaaa.” Nephy covered her face as she let out an adorable yelp.

Touched by the branching lightning, several of the bandits vanished into thin air.

Nephy’s mouth was flapping open and close without making a sound.

From that sudden attack, the bandits also stiffened up as if they didn’t understand just what had happened.

I have no intention of saying I’ll protect you or anything else so pushy.

Sure, offensive sorcery may have frightened her, but whatever the circumstances may be, being frightened by mere bandits was unacceptable. Those beings were like weeds or pebbles, so there wasn’t a single thing about them to fear.

That was why he showed her that bandits were nothing but tiny insects.

In any case, it seemed that the bandits at least understood that an enemy had appeared.

“D-Don’t panic! Even if he’s a sorcerer, it ain’t like he can just keep firing shit off! Press in before he can invoke the next spell!” Hearing the voice of what appeared to be their leader, the bandits rushed in with their weapons in hand.

“Master.”

“Stay behind me.” Saying that to Nephy after her trembling voice leaked out, Zagan stepped forward.

The bandit closest to Zagan was a large man about two heads taller than him. His arms were bulging with muscles that may have been thicker than Nephy’s waist.

That man came slashing with the axe in his hand. Even a large tree would likely be bisected by that, since it was a brutal strike. Something like Zagan’s head would easily be smashed like an egg, and the weapon was coming straight down on Zagan’s skull.

“R-Ridiculous... Urgh?” However, the one to leak out a shocked voice was the large man.

Zagan caught the large man’s axe barehanded. Not only that, even when the man pushed down, the axe did not budge an inch.

“Challenging a sorcerer with brute strength truly is ridiculous, isn’t it?” Speaking of sorcerers, to most people, they likely had the impression of an unathletic individual who sealed themselves in a gloomy laboratory surrounded by a large quantity of books.

However, with the power of sorcery, they could call down lightning, manipulate fire, and give birth to invisible shields. As long as they were also mortal, that almighty power would first be used to protect oneself.

They had skin so tough that an average blade would not leave a single wound on it, feet so fast that they could even overtake a swift horse, arms which could tear apart even iron barehanded, and a heart that did not tire even after fighting for an entire day and night.

As sorcerers aged, they would touch upon even more superhuman abilities that seemed like they were straight out of legends. Even if it were an Angelic Knight who devoted countless hours to training, the mere body of a regular

person could not cross swords with those monsters.

That was the existence known as sorcerers.

Zagan put his strength into his hand in an attempt to counterattack. A crack ran down the steel axe, and the large man's eyes peeled back.

"I-Impossible..." With a clang, the axe shattered like glass, and the man's befuddled voice leaked out.

The man collapsed to his knees crestfallen, and Zagan lightly struck his forehead with his finger as if simply driving away a fly.

"FUGYAH!?" Letting out a voice like a pig, the man was blown all the way back to the carriage. An unfortunate bandit who happened to be there ended up pinned under him.

"Eeek, the chief!"

...It seemed that unfortunate bandit was the leader. With their boss flattened, the other bandits ducked into the shadow of the carriage, with some even rushing into the surrounding thickets.

"Geh, ha-halp... Mr. Sorcerer! Help us!" Though that was a voice begging for help, they were not words pointed toward Zagan.

It wasn't clear where he was hidden beforehand, but a man suddenly stood in Zagan's way, seemingly at ease.

A sorcerer.

It seemed that these bandits had hired a sorcerer.

"Hmmm... A sorcerer who would save people? What a strange occurrence." As the sorcerer stroked his chin in a puzzled manner, he held up his other hand.

"However, this is also a contract. I don't know who you are, but I assure you that you shall regret having appeared before me." The moment a small magic circle appeared to have formed in that man's palm, flames burst out of it.

It was hot enough to choke on. The grass in the surrounding burned up, and even the bandits who were hiding there were covered in flames as they let out shrieks.

Carefully observing the movements of the sorcerer and the flames, Zagan muttered to himself.

“I see... Using the flames as a medium, he’s drawing out another magic circle, huh?” The flames weren’t just spreading out without a trajectory. They were running about as if drawing a circle with the sorcerer at its center. This was not an attack, but a form of restraint employed while forming a magical circle.

Engulfing the carriage and Zagan, a massive magic circle stretched out. It seemed he deemed Zagan a formidable foe and intended to use large scale sorcery.

Well, I don’t have any reason to just sit around and wait for that, either.

A tongue of flames closed in before his eyes. Nephy was gulping behind him, but Zagan was the one standing in front of her.

Zagan swung his arm to the side as if it was merely irritating.

The flames vanished as if dissolving, and even the burning thickets and carriage were extinguished. All that was left was the light from the magic circle at his feet.

Even so, the sorcerer stuck out his arm and yelled out sonorously.

“You’re pretty good. But you’re one step late! Turn to ashes!” The magic circle shined— And then, nothing happened.

“Wh-What in the...?” The magic circle certainly was shining even now.

However, it no longer belonged to the sorcerer.

Zagan ostentatiously let out a sigh.

“After making such a large magic circle, you’re not going to use even a single bit of sorcery?” When Zagan shook off the flames, he plundered the hegemony of the magic circle from the other sorcerer.

It was the same as when Barbatos teleported into Zagan’s barrier the other day.

“Rubbish... refers to fools like you.” After raising his index finger into the air, Zagan swung it downward and drew a vertical line.

A grand light then burst out of the magic circle.

“Gah?” Spears of lights rained incessantly down from the sky.

It was a single strike of converging lightning. It wasn't all that sophisticated, but when Zagan fired it, it had enough destructive power to pulverize a castle wall.

As for the sorcerer who took that strike head on, he was erased without leaving a single trace behind.

The most terrifying thing, however, was the fact that the carriage and its passengers in the surroundings weren't wounded in the least.

The sorcerer only created a single fire and even dragged his allies into it, while Zagan erased just his target. The difference in ability was clearly demonstrated right here.

Zagan then approached the carriage at a relaxed pace. There were still bandits remaining there.

“What's wrong? Come and get me. If you're ready to steal, then you're also fine with being robbed, right?”

“E-Eeek, what are you saying we've even done!?”

‘I don't want to hear that from you’ would likely have been an appropriate response at that point in time.

The leader of the bandits finally slipped out from under the large man, and shrank back while holding his butt.

“I wonder. Isn't it just because you're an eyesore? You guys are also doing the exact same thing, right?”

“HIGYAAAAAAAAAH!” Letting out a shriek, the bandit was erased while he opened his eyes wide in fear... Zagan thought there was an unpleasant scent in the air, and it turned out the bandit had pitifully shit himself.

The other bandits also surrendered and threw down their weapons upon seeing their leader's state.

Making certain that there was no longer anyone standing against him, Zagan

turned around to face Nephy.

He intended to open up a safe path, but Nephy was completely stiff in place with her eyes wide open.

Hm? Did I make some kind of mistake again? Zagan broke into a cold sweat, but he cleared out his throat and calmly tried to explain the facts as he saw them.

“You hear me, Nephy? Just as you saw, bandits are simple rubbish who are harmless to both man and beast. They have no hope of causing you harm, and if they are an eyesore, then after being lightly brushed aside they become docile.”

“They attacked a carriage though, so are they really harmless...?”

“Erk...” Having that pointed out to him by Nephy was harsh, especially when she still had that blank look on her face.

This girl... When's she's in a daze, she really can retort harshly huh...?

He was astonished, but realizing that point was also a happy discovery for him.

However, looking at the two of them, someone spat out words as if they couldn't stand it anymore. And as if bursting out, a booming voice erupted.

“That's amazing, Mr. Sorcerer!” Along with that voice, the passengers gathered around Zagan.

“Hey, you're that passenger who didn't get on earlier right?”

“Thanks, you saved us.”

“There's nice people even among the sorcerers, huh?” Being called out like that from all around him, Zagan's eyes darted about.

This wasn't the first time that he kicked around bandits. He also happened to coincidentally save people he passed by before too, but this was the first time he'd ever heard words of gratitude.

And the one being crammed in by the circle wasn't just Zagan.

“Hey, are you Mr. Sorcerer's companion?”

“What a beautiful child.”

“He’s a good master, huh?”

“Um...” Nephy was also being jostled about.

And Zagan was convinced.

It may be because Nephy is with me, right? Surely, if he was alone, then they would have run away in fear just as always.

He didn’t know what changed just from Nephy’s presence, but it seemed that she was the primary factor that brought about feelings other than fear.

Up until moments ago, Zagan was seriously considering taking all their money and gold, but now he was left with a complex and uncomfortable ticklish sensation.

And then, the coachman took out a small pouch.

“Hey, you. If it’s alright with you, could you ride along with us as an escort? Naturally, I’ll pay you... Though I don’t have all that much money.”

“S-Sure, sounds good.” Having the small pouch forced into his hand, Zagan accepted it without any questions. From the feeling of its weight, he could tell that there were dozens of gold coins in it.

Previously, that amount would have been loose change to him, but now he was most thankful for it. It was plenty to buy ingredients as well as clothing for Nephy.

What’s this? Is gold something that pops up so easily? In other words, it seemed like if he just went around obliterating villains as he saw fit, then money would just come his way.

Just as he began harboring that slight hope, he came to a startling realization. In the eyes of an average person, he was foremost on any list of villains.

That thought made him think his knees would go out, and while Zagan was writhing in anguish, he and Nephy were pushed into the carriage.

While sitting down next to each other, the two of them exchanged glances.

“Master.”

“...What?”

“Why... did you save these people?”

“Eh? Ah... I see. I ended up saving them, huh?” All Zagan wanted to do was show Nephy that there was no need to be afraid of bandits. He had no awareness that he was saving the carriage’s passengers or anything.

But isn’t this a good chance to attract her attention? Ulterior motives began swelling up within Zagan.

Yes, he simply needed to utter some motivating words that would get Nephy to open her heart to him.

While praying for advice to come down to him from Barbatos for just this moment in time, Zagan replied as if it were perfectly natural.

“All I did was teach those conceited pieces of trash their place.”

Why do I always mess this up! Was it his self-respect getting in the way? There was no way he could say sweet words like it was to protect Nephy, or that he couldn’t abandon the weak or anything like that.

And yet, the only thing that came out of his mouth was a bluff that wasn’t worth any more than dog shit. After throwing his long-awaited chance into the garbage all on his own, Zagan was once more in in the throes of anguish.

That was why he didn’t notice that contrary to expectations, Nephy was looking up at him with eyes full of interest.



“See you later, buddy. You can ride again with me any time. Actually, if it’s you, then hop on for free.” Having gotten a ride on the carriage, Zagan ended up going to Kianoides. As the carriage came to a halt, the cat-faced coachman said that before departing.

As usual, the town was noisy. Looking to one side, a noble lady was enjoying some shopping. Looking the other way, a filthy hoodlum was selling narcotics. Although it was a chaotic town, it had the advantage that everything was at one’s disposal.

Now then, where should we go?

For the time being, his objective was to gather ingredients, but the castle did

not have any of Nephy's daily necessities.

To begin with, what does she even need on a day-to-day basis? Zagan was completely ignorant of that point.

After clearing out his throat with a cough, he shifted his focus over to Nephy.

"Hear me, Nephy. Most everything is available in this town. It is fine for you to select whatever you so desire."

"Even if you were to give me rags, I would be satisfied." Hearing that reply, which held no hints of dreams or hope, Zagan felt like crying.

Let's see here... Even tomorrow, I don't think this girl will wish for something all of a sudden.

However, in that case, what was he supposed to buy for her?

While agonizing over such thoughts, Zagan shifted his focus over to the people walking around the city.

It wasn't like there weren't any nobles wearing dazzling dresses, but most were wearing clothing that was relatively easy to move around in. When it came to shoes, the majority of them were wore boots or sandals or the like that were easy to run in.

The long dress where the hems seemed like they had to be lifted up and the shoes with tapered heels that Nephy was wearing truly did look hard to walk in. Especially for a shopping trip.

"...Hmm. For now, shall we pick up some clothes?"

"Clothes... is it?"

"Yeah. That outfit... is hard to move in, right?" Yesterday she staggered while climbing the stairs, and today when she had to walk she had been lifting up the hems of her skirt.

Nephy blinked like she couldn't believe what was being said, but mysteriously didn't show any signs of disliking the situation.

While walking along and regretting that he hadn't at least asked the coachman where they sold women's clothing, after a little while, they were able

to find a store that seemed to fit the bill.

It appeared that they specialized in outfits targeted toward travelers, but they had complete sets of equipment for women on display on wooden stands. They looked to at least have some casual wear.

As Zagan opened the door to the shop, the interior suddenly fell silent.

It appeared that they were on guard upon seeing the attire of a sorcerer.

What looked like a young female clerk immediately came over. She was an avian with green wings on her back, and she was stylishly wearing the clothes lined up in the shop in an exemplary manner. Upon her well rounded chest was a name plate with “Manuela” written on it.

The clerk, Manuela, addressed Zagan with a cramped smile.

“W-Welcome. What sort of clothing do you desire?” It was a bluntly unwelcoming atmosphere, but Zagan was honestly thankful that the clerk came over.

He then pointed out to Nephy, who was standing behind him.

“I’d like you to pick out appropriate clothing for this girl.” Manuela looked over at Nephy and had her mouth wide open.

“Wow, what a beautiful child...” It seemed that even members of the same sex felt that way. Even though it wasn’t about himself, for some reason, Zagan felt proud.

However, Manuela’s expression instantly clouded over. And her gaze was pointed at the collar.

As I thought, I should remove that collar for her huh?

If she got such weird looks just from being in a shop, then she wouldn’t be able to walk outside. He didn’t give a damn about how he was told that she might run away if he took off the collar.

Zagan truly wished to save Nephy. Naturally, he had an ulterior motive, since he was in love with her, but there was no meaning even if the collar signified she belonged to him. With it, surely, she would always look at him as a sorcerer in the same way with that frightened face.

Nephy was led by the clerk deeper into the shop and vanished.

Zagan didn't really know where to stand, so for the time being he stepped out of the entrance and stood along a wall.

And as he did, Manuela immediately returned.

"How about this sort of style?"

"Hm... Huh, what!?" Looking at Nephy as she came out from further inside the shop, Zagan's eyelids peeled back.

On top of her naked body, Nephy had nothing but leather belts wreathed around her.

It more or less had the shape of clothing, or so it seemed. Her nipples and groin were superbly concealed. However, everything other than that was laid bare, and her large breasts were not being hidden at all.

He thought that even the collar seemed to blend in as part of the set in a somewhat artistic manner, but it wasn't like he made that kind of request. If there were any male clerks or customers around, then he would have had to go around gouging out their eyeballs.

Nephy was red all the way to the tips of her white ears, and she was writhing around trying to hide her body.

It was a reaction he hadn't seen even when she calmly rolled up her skirt the previous night.

Even someone who really wanted to die couldn't bear the shame. In that sense, she at least had some will to live in her, and that made Zagan somewhat happy, but right now wasn't the time for that.



White hair hid the trembling girl's body.

"U-Um, please... don't look..." As Zagan was brought back to his sense by Nephy's wavering voice, for some reason, Manuela then thrust her chest out in pride.

"How is it? I do believe that it is the perfect combination if I do say so myself."

"How is this perfect!? All I said was to pick out appropriate clothing, so how'd it end up like this!?"

"Huh...? I meant to match your tastes, though..." What exactly did she think of him?

Well, I'm a villainous sorcerer going around with a cute girl in a collar, I guess...

The title of sorcerer was basically a synonym for evil. Thinking about it carefully, the clerk's reaction seemed reasonable enough.

...No, even so, this kind of clothing was still out of the question.

Scratching his head, Zagan spoke up.

"I'm looking for casual, everyday clothes."

"Eeeh... Even though you have such nice material to work with?" While the clerk was blatantly making an unsatisfied expression, she took Nephy deeper into the shop again.

"Wait, leave what you're holding in your hand there behind." Incurably, Manuela was holding onto lascivious clothing that seemed to be underwear.

Having noticed that, even Nephy had tears forming in her eyes.

After scowling at Zagan, as one would expect, the clerk raised both her hands and gave up.

"C-Come on. I'm just kidding, okay?" It didn't look like that at all, and Zagan pointed a suspicious gaze at her. After the clerk put down that piece of clothing, Nephy placed her hands on her chest as if she was relieved from the depths of her heart.

Before long, after changing clothes a second time, Nephy returned.

“Well now, how is it?”

“Hoo...” This time, Zagan let out an honest sigh of admiration.

She was wearing a bright blue dress with an apron on top of it, which was decorated with showy lace, and boots that looked easy to walk in protected her feet.

They were clothes for a servant, but he honestly thought that she looked adorable.

Manuela then began explaining in a somehow dejected manner.

“It’s an orthodox maid uniform, but the dress and apron are both made of silk, so it can even be used as a uniform for a lady-in-waiting. The boots also have healing properties, so it abates the fatigue for any work performed standing.” They didn’t look bad and also seemed to be quite functional.

Gazing at it once more, Zagan felt that they were fine articles.

“How is it, Nephy?”

“If it is something you’re giving me, Master, then I will use it.”

“...Look, if you keep saying that, I’ll make you wear those clothes from before again.” The eyes of the avian clerk next to her dubiously sparkled, and she dragged out the clothing made from leather belts once more.

At that, Nephy quickly shook her head in a fluster. Zagan felt like this was the first time she made such an amusing reaction.

“I-I think this one is good Master!”

“I see. Then this will do.” Manuela clicked her tongue with a smack. She was a clerk with quite the bad manners.

After handling the bill, the clerk whispered something into Nephy’s ear.

(Thank goodness that your master cherishes you so.) Zagan couldn’t hear what was said at all, but Nephy’s eyes suddenly shot wide open.

And after that, she hesitated and nodded seriously.

“...Yes.” Her expression looked somehow happy.

Leaving the shop behind, Zagan then asked her about it.

“What did the clerk tell you?”

“Oh... That I have a good Master.”

“Is that so?” It was likely just lip service, but he couldn’t really understand the meaning in going out of the way to say that.

Next to Zagan, who was now tilting his head, Nephy gently brushed her new clothes as if she was satisfied with them.

(Am I... being cherished... I wonder?) That trembling voice that didn’t know if she could truly believe it, didn’t reach anyone’s ears as it vanished into the wind.



Now then, where to next?

Having changed into new clothing, Nephy seemed to be able to walk much more easily. With this, it would likely be fine to walk around here and there.

While thinking that, Zagan felt something pulling back on him. As he turned around, he could see that Nephy was timidly grasping the hem of his robe.

The person in question seemed to be unaware of it, and tilted her head to the side blankly.

I see... After being teased by the clerk, she may have gotten scared.

Comparing her gloomy figure from yesterday to her charming self today made Zagan feel happy.

Zagan carefully kept walking while making sure not to shake off her hand, but also tried to ensure that Nephy didn’t realize what he was doing. And as they walked along, next they heard the boisterous sound of metal clanging.

Looking over to the source of the noise, it seemed that there was a blacksmith nearby. Alongside swords and armor used by Angelic Knights and soldiers, there was a mountain of metal trinkets piled together.

And within that, there were also slave collars.

“We’re entering that shop.”

“Yes.” As Zagan walked toward the blacksmith, Nephy followed after him.

The interior looked just like any old workshop. The walls had a large amount of merchandise lined up on shelves, and deeper within there were several men striking heated metal.

After calling out to the men, one among them jumped up, clearly startled.

However, that reaction was only natural when a sorcerer suddenly called out to you.

While looking completely terrified, the man turned over toward Zagan.

“C-Can I help you?”

“Look, there’s just something I want your input on.” The one who came over was a male dwarf. He didn’t have a beard, and because of that it was difficult to tell his age. He looked to be a young man, but he may also have been middle aged.

Dwarves were nimble with their hands, and it was said that they prided themselves when it came to delicate ornaments and contraptions.

Zagan then stood Nephy before him.

“I want you to have a look at this girl’s collar... Do you know how to remove it?” Nephy’s body trembled with a twitch.

And then, she looked at Zagan like she couldn’t believe it.

Hm? Now that I think of it, did I tell Nephy that I would remove her collar? He felt like he’d never said anything.

Even if it couldn’t be removed right away, if she knew he was intent on doing so, then she would probably be more at ease, so Zagan was discouraged at the low level of his conversational abilities.

Nephy then nervously opened her mouth to speak.

“Um, Master...”

“If you continue to wear that collar, then you would forever be Marchosias’ property, right? You do not need it.” Having once more referred to Nephy as an object, Zagan covered his face.

And yet, Nephy's cheeks blushed slightly as she nodded.

"...Yes."

"...Good." He didn't know what was good about it, but it took all of Zagan's effort just to utter that reply.

After that, the dwarf blacksmith raised his voice in a troubled manner.

"Remove it, you say? You mean this collar?"

"Yeah."

"...Please spare me the jokes. Isn't this a sorcery apparatus? Our hands can't manage anything like this." Nephy's shoulder slumped slightly, but Zagan also already knew that much.

"I want to hear about its structure. Is it something that can be removed by breaking the lock?" After hearing that question, the blacksmith fixedly observed the collar.

Eventually, he pointed out the lock which connected the collar together. The mass of metal connected to the keyhole had six shafts extending out of it, and looked to be tying the collar together.

"Please take a look at this lock. This collar is structured so that it is fixed on this one point. As soon as the lock is removed, it'll crumble to pieces. Normally, that is." By adding on normally, it probably meant he didn't know what kind of mechanism was added on with sorcery.

Zagan then replied with a groan.

"Precisely because sorcery is a power that's meant to overturn natural notions, it's made to look like the original. For a collar with such a structure, the lock is likely not just a decoration, right?"

"Also, this is a little difficult to tell you, but..." The blacksmith made a face like he was hesitant to speak.

It seemed he didn't want Nephy to hear it. And after distancing themselves from her, he whispered into Zagan's ear quietly.

(It's likely, that there is a trap setup in this thing.) (A trap?) (Yes. If it isn't

removed with the proper procedures, then a mechanism will activate... In the worst case, there's a probability that something horrible will happen to that little lady's neck...) Zagan didn't even want to think about what that something horrible would entail.

That was likely why the blacksmith was also being somewhat evasive about his answers.

As I thought, it'll be dangerous to remove it by force...

If it came down to simply destroying the collar, then Zagan's power was more than enough.

However, he had decided to exercise caution since the collar was left behind by an Archdemon, and it seemed he'd made the correct decision.

"I think the best option would be to use the original key to open it."

"Well, I bet it is." Zagan knew that, but even the hosts of the auction didn't have it.

As for clues, well, it's not like I don't have any...

However, it was true that there wasn't a hand that he could actually play out.

For the time being, Zagan found out all that he wanted to know, then pulled out a few silver coins from his pocket. It was the change from when he bought Nephy's clothes.

"You have my thanks. Take it."

"No, I didn't do anything worth charging you for. Besides, there's no way I can take any money from you."

"Huh...? What do you mean?" While flashing a bitter smile, the dwarf blacksmith said the following.

"I was... saved by you before after all." Zagan didn't recall such a thing at all, so he tilted his head to the side.

"It's already been... about one year ago. When our carriage was attacked, you saved me and my daughter. At the time, we freaked out and ran away, but you overlooked us without getting angry. Please, somehow, forgive us for that."

It seemed that among the riffraff Zagan had kicked about because he found them to be an eyesore, there was a sorcerer or something that attacked. And as a result, this man and his daughter ended up being saved by Zagan.

He didn't have any particular intention of demanding gratitude from them, but he was grateful that he didn't want to be paid right now. Zagan then returned the silver coins he took out back to his pocket.

"Well then, I'll put this away. You should forget that trivial matter too. I also do not recall it." Saying that, it kind of felt like he was trying to gloss over the fact that he didn't hand over any coins, but the smith let out a strange laugh.

"I won't forget it, you know? If you need anything else, please stop by any time." After that, Zagan and Nephy left the shop behind.

What's going on today? The people around him were far too friendly to the point where it felt creepy. Did bringing Nephy along really change things that drastically?

Zagan didn't seem to realize the truth.

He didn't seem to know that he, who had always made a face like everything in the world deserved his ire, was now making an awfully tender expression.



After that, by the time they finished doing all the shopping they needed, the sun was beginning to set.

It wasn't all that late, but it was also unreasonable to return to the castle and make Nephy cook a meal. And so, the two of them went to a small restaurant.

Perhaps because of the odd time, there weren't too many customers present. Including Zagan and Nephy, there were only around ten people. The wooden floorboards creaked as the shop employees walked around, and the beams reached all the way up to the roof. The lamps hanging down from the beams were faintly illuminating the various tables.

Zagan didn't understand a single thing written on the menu. After all, the very name of any cuisine was foreign to him. Still, for the time being he tried ordering something that was probably meat, something like a salad, and some

bread.

He didn't have much in terms of habit when it came to eating vegetables, but he didn't need to imagine what would happen to Nephy's figure if all she ate was meat.

While waiting for the food, Zagan realized that Nephy was looking at him as if she had something she wanted to say.

"What is it?"

"No, um..." She hesitated to speak, but even so, Nephy touched her collar.

"Master, do you... intend to remove this collar?"

"Hm? Oh, now that you mention it, I've never really talked about it, huh? Well yeah, I do." Because he said it in such a roundabout manner before, it seemed that she wasn't confident of the fact.

Feeling somewhat embarrassed from having her ask him that face to face, Zagan replied while acting curt. 'Of course I do!' or some other words that would bring her peace of mind just wouldn't come out.

Nephy opened her mouth many times over as if she was somewhat conflicted, but she couldn't really find the words she wanted to say.

However, as if resolving herself, the girl with the look of a maid opened her mouth to speak.

"Do you not worry... that if the collar's removed, I'll run away?"

Nephy was an elf. Not only that, she was an individual with snow-white hair said to possess tremendous amounts of mana. If the collar was removed, she would likely be able to use sorcery.

That collar itself was also proof that she was bound to Zagan's side. However, Zagan tried to have that collar removed.

Well, there's no way I wouldn't be worried about that, huh?

Of course, even Zagan had thought of that danger. He'd spent an outrageous amount of money, one million gold coins, to purchase her. There was no way he could afford to simply lose her after all that. As a man, and as a sorcerer, it

would be an enormous loss of face.

He also thought that in reality, it would end up like that. After all, unlike Zagan, Nephy held no affection for him.

It was just, even if that were the case, if for example she did escape—

Even so, I want to remove it.

Zagan had no thoughts of putting those feelings into words.

That was why, in the end, all that came out of his mouth were the following words.

“Hmph... In any case, it is not something that can be immediately removed. Don’t hold onto any futile hopes.” He was completely at his wits’ end.

Really, was saying ‘Even so, I want to remove the collar,’ really not possible for him?

It’s probably because I want to stay by her side. That was likely why he told her not to expect anything.

That aside, using the word ‘futile’ was really going too far. Was there not a grimoire along the lines of ‘How to Hold a Conversation with a Girl’ laying around somewhere? On this occasion, Zagan wished in his heart that somebody would tell him of such a thing, even if it was fake.

And yet, Nephy nodded in a somehow satisfied manner.

“Yes.” Zagan felt like he said something cruel to his girl, and he was once more left perplexed.

Still, the time he spent writhing in anguish this time around ended quickly.

Their meal was quickly brought over to them.

It was a menu he had never seen before, but it was something he dreamed of quite a long time ago. He couldn’t even remember when the last time he used a knife and fork was, but he at least remembered how to use them.

Even as Zagan began cutting his meat, Nephy remained still while absentmindedly gazing at the food.

“What is it? Do you not know how to use a spoon and fork?” If he

remembered correctly, he once heard that in the northern countries, they used sticks of wood called 'chopsticks' to eat their meals.

It may have been that elves who lived in the remote north also didn't use knives and forks.

That was what Zagan was thinking as he asked her, but Nephy shook her head to the sides energetically.

"No, that's not the..."

"Then eat. There's no way you're not hungry, right?" He once more put it in a way where it felt like he was pushing her aside, but it seemed that Nephy had also gotten used to his words. She only made a curious expression and was not frightened of him this time around. Rather, it was likely something that he should have realized earlier.

As a sorcerer, Zagan was able to use sorcery to dull his sense of hunger, but Nephy had her mana sealed by the collar. It also didn't look like she had much physical strength. In the first place, she hadn't had anything to eat since morning other than the dried meat and milk, which couldn't even be called a meal.

As if affirming what Zagan had to say, Nephy's stomach let out an adorable grumbling noise.

Here pointy ears lightly dyed red at that.

"Um, would it be alright for even me to eat as well?"

"What...? Is there a reason not to?"

Actually, could it be that this is too frugal as a menu choice? However, her reaction this time around looked to be different from the one she had in the morning.

And then, Zagan suddenly remembered her circumstances.

"...Could it be that this is the first time you've had a meal like this?" Nephy returned a single deep nod.

Ah, I see... Nephy was... also like that...

Zagan felt like he finally understood why it was that he fell in love with Nephy at first sight.

She was the same as him.

She was the same as Zagan back when he had no power, no place he belonged, and despaired at the harshness of the world.

That was why Zagan was able to give her the following reply as if it were nothing.

“Then don’t worry about it. I’m also similar in that sense. It’s fine if you just eat whatever looks good. Here in this place, there’s nobody you need show restraint for.”

“Still, I...”

“Enough, just eat. It’s a small shop, but it’s much better compared to the dried meat from this morning.” Saying that, Zagan brought a single slice of meat to his mouth, but in truth he couldn’t really grasp its taste.

She’s not feeling down from the talks of the collar, is she? Also, man, how do I invite her to a meal normally? While those questions and anxieties swirled around in his mind, Zagan couldn’t even taste anything.

Nephy put her small clasped hand up against her mouth. The corners of her eyes were also somehow hanging down, and it may have been Zagan’s imagination, but those actions seemed to indicate that she was laughing.

After that, Nephy put her two hands together and picked up the fork.

“Thank you for the meal.” The first thing she stretched her hand out to was a small tomato. She tried to stab it with the fork, but it didn’t go very well and the tomato slipped away.

Nephy’s expression didn’t appear to change at all, but the tips of her pointy ears were lightly dyed red. It seemed that she was embarrassed in her own way.

“...” Perhaps having noticed Zagan’s gaze, Nephy’s body twitched as she trembled, and this time she took a spoon in hand. After cleanly scooping up the tomato, she finally carried it over to her pink lips.

“Huh...?” Rolling it over on top of her tongue, Nephy made a curious face. It

was surely because she didn't taste anything.

It doesn't have any taste if you just lick it... Bite down! Zagan wasn't confident enough to provide her gentle advice like he wished. And, above all else, Nephy herself would likely have been embarrassed if he tried.

While he watched her attentively and cheered her on within his heart, Nephy finally sunk her teeth into the tomato.

With the sound of something juicy being crushed, Nephy's eyes shot wide open.

"H-How is it...?" Unable to answer, after silently moving her mouth for a while, Nephy returned a single deep nod. From that movement, her snow-white hair trailed along her chest.

"I think... it's delicious." Having said that, perhaps finding her words insufficient, she shook her head.

"It's the first time... I've eaten... this." Now that he thought of it, back when she said that she would cook for him, she said that she 'learned by watching,' too. It may have been that she wasn't in an environment where she could eat anything proper.

Such an environment was something to lament over, but to the contrary, Zagan's face seemed to loosen up due to the affinity he felt toward her.

"Do you like it?"

"I don't... really know." Saying that, she scooped up another tomato into her spoon.

"I thought... it would be some sort of sweet. But...eating something so juicy like this... is a first for me."

Well, I guess the small tomato does look like a candy ball.

Zagan had also experienced stealing a tomato from a store thinking it was candy, and being disappointed at the sour taste after trying it. Right after that, he got caught and beaten to boot.

I see. She's a girl after all. She likes sweets, I guess.

Zagan felt like this was the first he learned of what could be called Nephy's tastes. He thought of ordering some sort of sweet dessert later on.

While thinking of such things, Zagan also stretched his fork out to a tomato.

"Urgh..." However, just like with Nephy, it slipped away.

He tried challenging it two, three times, but as expected he couldn't stab it well. Zagan also didn't usually use a fork, so his struggle made sense.

Just as he resigned himself and thought of using the spoon instead... Nephy scooped up that tomato with her spoon. Then, she presented that spoon to Zagan.

"...By all means."

"What's... that...?" Zagan's eyes shot wide open.

—*Is she... feeding me...?* He tried to think back to why the scene seemed so familiar. He was sure he'd seen this before.

A man and woman who looked like they were close were using a spoon to feed each other a confectionery — though it was a tomato in this case.

At that time, a sense of hatred swelled up inside him that he couldn't even properly explain himself, but he knew he didn't hold any sort of particular feelings toward the action itself. Still, to think that the day would come where he himself would be confronted with it.

She was making a calm face, but the tips of Nephy's ears were bright red. After gazing at her for a while longer, he noticed her cheeks had also started to slightly flush.

Wait, isn't this the spoon that Nephy put in her mouth? Was she saying it was okay for him to put it in his own mouth?

Zagan drew his mouth closer to the spoon, the tension almost overwhelming him. Eventually, the tomato tumbled onto his tongue.

Biting his teeth into it, droplets filled with an acidic taste flooded out.

"...Tastes good, huh?"

"...Yes." After that, Nephy then appealed to him in a low voice as if she was

whispering.

“Master, are you not going to give me any orders?”

“Th-That’s right.” Before that, he didn’t even know what to talk about. Even if he thought of wanting to give her some sort of role, he had no idea what to make her do.

While keeping the same expression, Nephy nodded as if she was verifying something.

“Master, could you forgive me... for thinking that I want to be of use to you?” That was the very first moment Nephy put her desire into words of her own will.

However, having that expressly put into words mysteriously didn’t give off the impression that she was trying to flatter him.

Surely, she was in a position where she hesitated to even hold onto any sort of aspiration.

And yet, it isn’t about herself... She’s asking about me, really? For once, Zagan was able to reply honestly.

“I’ll allow it. Nephy, you may do as you desire.”

...In the end, he was only able to speak in an arrogant tone, though.

Even so, Nephy nodded with a serious expression.

“Yes. I will put my utmost effort into it.” It was an awfully formal reply, but Zagan was happy that she was demonstrating her own will.

“V-Very good. I’ll leave it to you, then.” As he stuck his fork out at another tomato in an attempt to hide his embarrassment, he managed to stab into it.

Zagan was about to carry it over to his mouth, but stopped his thoughts and put it out before Nephy.

“Huh...?” As if she couldn’t understand the meaning of his actions, Nephy tilted her head to the side.

Didn’t she just do it herself?

Maybe by some chance, she did so while unaware of it? Despite that,

however, she seemed quite embarrassed.

Still, this was all quite embarrassing for Zagan. Maintaining such a posture for a long period of time was difficult even when using the power of sorcery.

“You liked it, right? Then you may have it.” After he said that, Nephy finally seemed to have noticed that he was reciprocating what she had done.

Not only her ears, but even her cheeks turned red as she timidly opened her mouth.

With her pink lips open, he caught a glimpse of her glistening white teeth, and the tongue that stretched out from there looked strangely coquettish. While she let out a voice like she was gasping, the tomato tumbled into the depths beyond her lips.

After pulling out the fork, some of the droplets spilled out, then traveled along her jaw.

As if she was unable to bear the shame, Nephy covered her face.

Somehow, it felt like he was teasing her, but instead of feeling remorse, Zagan wanted to see her make that kind of face even more.

“How is it?” As he tried asking her that, Nephy looked through the gaps of her fingers with an overly serious expression and nodded.

“It’s... delicious.”

“...Sure is, huh?”

Zagan couldn’t shake the feeling that he had wronged her somehow. And that little exchange was spectated by all the people inside the shop. Upon finally realizing that, the two of them ended up leaving the shop behind in a fluster.

After all that, the clumsy pair settled down with the mutual perception that they were master and servant for the time being.

Chapter III: It's Terrifying When a Normally Quiet Child Gets Angry

It happened one week ago — on the morning of the day that Zagan and Nephy met.

Lately, there had been serial kidnappings of young women in the trading town of Kianoides. The criminals were a handful of sorcerers, and it seemed the girls were being used as sacrifices for some repulsive sorcery.

Chastille's group was the subjugation squad for those criminals. After defeating the prominent sorcerers involved with the scandal, they then rescued the captured girls. It was truly the triumphant return of the heroes — and something strange happened immediately following that.

The rescued girls were left to reinforcements from the church, and in the early morning, while the subjugation squad was returning to Kianoides ahead of them, Chastille was not wearing her equipment as she had just finished bathing.

And at that time, the man who had been protecting her back suddenly drew his sword and attacked her allies. Thanks to the help of her other comrades, she somehow managed to run away from that place, but she didn't possess any decent weapons, and was immediately cornered.

However, that man was someone else entirely, a sorcerer who had peeled off his own skin. On a later day, the husk of that man would be discovered washed ashore by the river.

Chastille was about to experience that very same pain... No, she knew she would go through a worse fate than him, but at that time, 'someone' ended up saving her.

It couldn't have been... just a dream.

It was a man with far crueler eyes than the one who attacked her. In truth, he killed an opponent who was begging for his life without any hesitation at all, even if he was scum.

But still, she thought something odd to herself. *Somehow, he looked kind of lonely too.*

After a little investigation, she immediately found out that he was a sorcerer named Zagan. And since then, for whatever reason, Chastille had been thinking of nothing but him.

Yes, on that morning, when she was attacked in the Forest of the Lost, Zagan had saved Chastille.

Swiping back her red hair, she fell flat against her work desk.

“Haaa...” And then, she let out such a sigh.



“Worrying about something, Archangel Chastille?” Hearing a voice call out to her from behind made Chastille jump.

“M-My apologies, Your Eminence Clavwell!” An old man wearing the ceremonial dress of a priest of the highest standing was standing before her. A Cardinal — in fact, one among the top of the church, and Chastille’s direct superior.

The old man then made a mild smile, and shook his head.

“Please do not be so formal. If the hero who subjugated the criminals behind the serial kidnapping were to humble themselves so, then I would have the hostility of the populace pointed toward me. Not to mention that you’re also the Maiden of the Sacred Sword, right?” Maiden of the Sacred Sword — that was the title bestowed upon Chastille.

Cleaving through the magic circles of sorcerers, nullifying the effects of sorcery, and if all twelve of them were gathered, it was said that even an Archdemon could be struck down by them. The Sacred Swords were the ultimate weapons of the church.

Unlike when she was saved by Zagan, Chastille was wearing her Anointed Armor, and next to her stood a greatsword whose length just about spanned her own height. They were both anti-sorcerer equipment, and also served as formal dress for such places of etiquette.

Chastille then shook her head to the sides.

“...I’ve even lost four of the Angelic Knights that were entrusted to me by Your Eminence. This is a failure brought about by my inexperience. Why in the world would I be rewarded for that?” Meyers, Emilio, Jamil, and Doran were all proud and gallant Angelic Knights.

That morning, if it weren’t for the surprise attack, they would have likely easily attained victory even against that sorcerer.

Their deaths were a tragic event caused by Chastille’s carelessness.

The old Cardinal then shook his head in an affectionate manner.

“It is no fault of yours. The ones who should be abhorred are those damned

sorcerers who manipulate such repulsive sorcery. You have splendidly avenged your fallen comrades and returned to us. It is fine for you to take pride in that.”

“...Understood.” With a complicated expression on her face, Chastille nodded back to him.

It wasn't her who avenged her fallen comrades. It was a passing sorcerer. If not for him, even Chastille would not have been present.

And yet, the one being acknowledged highly here was Chastille.

Chastille was a devout believer in the church, but she also understood that the church was not as wholesome and sacred an existence as they claimed. She had responsibilities as an Archangel, a title she gained due to her aptitude with a Sacred Sword, but she had no intention of casting aside her own will.

She at least knew to differentiate between the words she should and should not speak.

The Cardinal then stared fixedly at Chastille.

“Chastille, it seems you have been investigating the sorcerer Zagan, correct?”

“I have,” Chastille answered him clearly with an accompanying nod.

“The sorcerer who attacked us named himself as Zagan.” That was, in fact, the name he gave them. *But Zagan is actually the name of the sorcerer who saved me.*

In other words, he was assuming that name and performing crimes.

One reason Chastille was investigating Zagan was because she wanted to prove his innocence. And facing the Cardinal, she spread out the documents she had been investigating.

“However, from what I've gathered, the sorcerer known as Zagan seems to be a completely different person.” The Cardinal then nodded as if he already knew that.

“It is likely that was the sorcerer known as the ‘Face Peeler.’ Just as the name implies, he peels fresh skin from people and uses it to fuel repulsive sorcery. An order had been sent out to subjugate him. It seems he was also supporting the serial kidnappings as well.” From those words, Chastille understood that the

Cardinal had also been investigating the matter.

“Hear me Chastille. This case... has not been closed. It seems that aside from the sorcerers that we brought to light, there is still a true culprit behind it all.”

“...Tch, have more victims appeared?” The Cardinal then shook his head as if comforting her.

“Do not be rash, Chastille. By the efforts of your squad, the scheme of those damned sorcerers has certainly been obstructed... However, from our investigation of their hideout, we have come to the conclusion that there is still a true culprit that has been overlooked.” There were still survivors other than the ‘Face Peeler’ who attacked Chastille.

Do I... still have the chance to avenge my comrades? After she gulped down her saliva out of tension, the Cardinal spoke his name in a solemn voice.

“The sorcerer Zagan — a sorcerer who has been building power at a terrifying rate in recent years.”

“Wha—” Unintentionally, Chastille raised her voice.

“That man should be unrelated to the culprit.”

“The name of an unrelated sorcerer has jumped out twice during the same incidents. It cannot be mere coincidence.” And by that declaration, the Cardinal passed on the following in a heavy tone.

“Sorcerers are evil. They must be destroyed. Even if he is unrelated to the incident, there is no changing the fact that he is an evil man who must be brought to justice. Thus, our Kianoides branch will carry out the subjugation of the sorcerer Zagan.”

“Tch...” This was a precept of absolute compliance touted by the church.

It may have even been appropriate to call it a curse, in fact.

Until the sorcerers are annihilated, the church will continue hunting them.

Even if Zagan was falsely accused of a crime, once the church decided to hunt him, there was no revoking the decision. Even if a wielder of a Sacred Sword like Chastille were defeated, even if thousands upon tens of thousands of corpses were piled up, the church would not stop until the sorcerer was killed.

Considering that fact, there was no meaning at all for Chastille to claim his innocence.

On the contrary, it was entirely possible she would be deemed a traitor and put to trial as a heretic.

I don't have any intention of holding my own life dear, but nothing will change if I act without caution.

If she wanted to repay the favor to the one who saved her life, she couldn't simply rant or rave here and be caught.

She had to take steps to protect him, and to let him escape.

After closing her eyes for a brief period, Chastille opened her mouth.

"Then Your Eminence, by all means, please bestow the duty of subjugating that Zagan to Archangel Chastille. Please grant me the opportunity to wipe away the disgrace of my earlier failure." In response to those words, the Cardinal let out a voice of admiration with an 'Oooh...'

"Well spoken. As one would expect of our Archangel, the Maiden of the Sacred Sword."

Chastille knew her decision could bring her to ruin. But even so, she had her own convictions.

Even if she were to go against the church as a result, she had things she wouldn't yield over.

Even if nobody were to thank her, even if the people of the world were to spit down at her, if she had to throw away her convictions just to guard her life, then she would rather have chosen death.

Precisely because she was that kind of woman, she was granted a Sacred Sword at the ripe young age of seventeen. And moreover...

That man... had very lonely eyes.

It was like even though deep in his heart he sought warmth, he couldn't accept that and pushed everything away. They were the eyes of a stray dog.

At that time, the one who truly needed to be saved was not Chastille, but that

man. It was to the point where she thought such things...

That was why Chastille made this mission her own.



“Are you perhaps awake, Master?” Zagan was one who fundamentally slept while seated.

The throne of the castle was at the center of the barrier, so it was also the point where all of its functionality was concentrated. If he sat there, no matter what attack he received, he would not lose his life in a single strike. And above all, if a suspicious presence approached him, he would be able to sense it immediately.

In other words, within the firm protection of his castle was an even more perfectly protected space atop the throne.

Rather than sleep across it, he could react better if he was seated. That was why, before he even knew it, it had become a habit to sleep there.

And it was now the morning.

“Good morning, Master.” Nephy, dressed in the outfit of a maid, greeted him so.

It wasn’t like she woke him up.

“Y-Yeah.” As Zagan replied, Nephy bobbed her head and bowed down at the waist.

“Preparations for breakfast have been completed. Will you be eating?”

“Eh, breakfast? Did you make it Nephy?”

“Yes.” Certainly, just the previous morning, she said that she would make a meal, but to think that she would be prepared to do so immediately the next day...

And there, a sudden question came to mind.

“Could it be that you were waiting for me to wake up this whole time?”

“Yes.”

“...You can just wake me up at times like this.”

“But you looked sound asleep...” Having that said to him, Zagan found something odd.

Now that I think of it, having someone right in front of me and not waking up... is rather strange, isn't it?

He knew that simply skipping sleep for a day wasn't enough to make him fall into such a deep slumber.

While cocking his head in puzzlement, he remembered that Nephy was standing stock-still where she was the whole time.

“If you were just standing there, didn't you get tired?”

“I was fine. I believe it is thanks to the mana in my boots.” Now that he recalled, the clerk at the clothing shop said that they had the power to abate fatigue. It certainly did seem to have that effect.

“While you were waiting, were you just standing still the whole time?”

“No, I was gazing at your face, Master.”

“I-I see...” Having that said right in front of him, Zagan covered his face.

Although, since she went out of her way to make a meal, he couldn't just keep her waiting forever.

“Breakfast, right?”

“Yes.” As Zagan stood up, Nephy stepped to the side and bowed.

She already had the manners of a professional maid.

As he headed toward the castle's dining room, Zagan let out a slight 'Ah'.

“Huh...? Is something the matter?”

“Ah, um, Nephy.”

“Yes.” In response to the girl who was tilting her head to the side while blankly staring at him, Zagan scratched the back of his neck, and called out to her in a flustered voice.

“...Morning, Nephy.” It was the words he couldn't return to her the previous

day.

Nephy blinked twice as if it was unexpected, and then spoke in a somehow delighted voice.

“Yes. Good morning, Master.” Somehow, the inside of Zagan’s chest was warm, and felt strangely good.



The door on the right side of the entrance hall led into a dining room.

The spacious room on the other side had a single long table in it that could seat around twenty people, and an extravagant chandelier was dangling overhead.

This should also have been a place like a graveyard filled with skeletons and cobwebs, but right now it was incredibly tidy. Even the table cloth did not have a single crease on it, as if it were brand new.

It seemed that Nephy was the type of girl who, when given a job, would move about and carry it out meticulously.

Lined up on the now immaculate table was a salad sprinkled with oil and soft looking bread. Just when Zagan thought that one of the bowls was empty, Nephy poured some warmed-up soup into it. It seemed she took the fact that Zagan might not wake up right away into consideration.

It was a moderate amount of food, but even Zagan understood that it was a menu with a good balance of nutrition.

And then, he tilted his head to the side.

“Hm? Did we buy anything like bread yesterday?”

“No. I baked it just a moment ago.”

“You can make bread? On your own?” Zagan made a face like he couldn’t believe it, and Nephy tilted her head to the side like a small bird.

“Is that strange?”

“I don’t know. This is the first time I’ve ever met someone who could cook so well. At the very least, there was never anybody around me who could make

such a good-looking meal.”

“Is that so?” Though she muttered that in a monotonous voice, Zagan didn’t overlook the fact that her long ears were quivering.

Is that maybe a sign... that she’s delighted? It was certain that when she was embarrassed, the tips of her ears would turn red.

It was said the eyes said much more about a person than their mouth, but in Nephy’s case, it may have been easier to observe her ears instead.

While finding such a discovery pleasant, Zagan noticed that Nephy was still standing.

Atop the table, only Zagan’s portion of food had been prepared.

“Nephy, did you already eat?”

“No.”

“Then eat with me here.” Rather, it made Zagan feel ill at ease if he was just eating on his own.

Nephy then stirred slightly as if she was troubled.

“What’s wrong?”

“That’s... I only made enough... for Master’s portion.”

“Did you not intend to eat?”

“No, making my own portion simply slipped my mind.” It really did sound like something this girl would do.

And leaving a praiseworthy girl on her own and eating completely by himself wasn’t something Zagan could stomach.

“Then, it’s fine to split it in half, right?” Zagan tore the bread apart in two.

The freshly baked bread was still a little warm, and it easily split to the sides as if stretching out. As the fragrant aroma brushed against Zagan’s nose, he reflexively let out a sigh with a ‘Hooo.’

However, Nephy still did not take a seat.

“How about sitting down?”

“...Um, the only chair I managed to prepare... is the one you’re using, Master.” To begin with, this room was dirty to the point where it couldn’t be considered a good environment for a meal. If Nephy had cleaned up on top of making the food, then there was no possible way for her to prepare all the chairs.

Zagan would have taken another seat without worrying about getting dirty, but all the other chairs had already been stowed away.

If I yield the chair at the table to her... No, Nephy would never sit at the table she made just for me, huh?

However, he couldn’t spot anything resembling a seat in the area. And so, for the time being, he thought it was fine to share the chair itself. However, the chair didn’t seem to be made all that sturdily. If both of them sat on it, it was clear that it would tumble over.

No, it should be possible to keep it steady, right?

Even if it was useless to try and sit on half the chair each, maybe it would work if she sat on top of his knees. Considering Nephy’s weight, it wouldn’t have bothered him at all if she sat on top of them while they ate, and since they would both be facing the food, it was quite the good idea. Thinking about it, Zagan had just woken up, and was maybe still half-asleep.

That was why he didn’t doubt for a second that it was the best solution.

After making sure of that, Zagan nodded his head.

“Then you can just sit here.”

“B-by here, you mean...?” Nephy winced.

Hearing Nephy’s perplexed voice leak out, Zagan mercilessly pointed out his own lap.

It was plain to see that Nephy’s azure eyes shook with unease upon being told to sit on his lap. It even looked like the tips of her snow-white hair were somehow springing up.

From that girl’s reaction, Zagan finally realized that he was saying something strange.

Hm? No wait, sitting on my lap... Isn't that practically the same as embracing each other? Coming to his senses, even he realized it was a terrible idea, which made him want to curl up into a ball and die.

However, Nephy then resolutely opened her mouth to speak.

"I cannot commit such a rude act." That was only reasonable. It was also the best possible answer to give in such a situation. If Zagan simply nodded his head, everything would have settled there.

However, hearing Nephy's tactful and effective reply left Zagan perturbed, so he ended up being utterly obstinate.

"Do not concern yourself. I am saying it is fine."

What the hell am I saying!? It may just have been that he didn't want to admit his own mistake. Honestly, if it was something he could rip off, he was sure he would've torn off his own mouth after saying that.

"B-But..." The tips of Nephy's ears were dyed red. And while he looked at her face that seemed to be forming faint tears...

What's this? I feel like I'll drive her into a corner with just a little more.

Even though he knew it was rude of him, after seeing her so shaken he felt like seeing more of it.

Clearing his throat with a cough, Zagan once more slapped the top of his legs.

"Be quick about it. The food will grow cold."

"Eek..." Along with a delicate and long sigh, Nephy's pointy ears drooped down.

It seemed that she had given up.

"Master, all is... as you will..." Nephy timidly sat down on Zagan's lap.

She seriously did it! The soft feeling of her buttocks was transmitted through her skirt. He wanted to hug her from behind and gently pet her.

Unintentionally, the sound of Zagan gulping down his saliva rang out.

But even so, since it was his order, Zagan pretended to be calm and split off a piece of bread.

“Here, you may eat it.”

“...Master, this is... quite embarrassing.” Nephy’s ears were bright red right down to their roots.

“Indeed. I can tell from looking.”

“...Master, that’s mean.” Leaking out a voice akin to whimper, Nephy brought her face closer to Zagan’s palm. And then, she took the piece of bread with her pink lips and ate it.

“Um, I can eat the rest on my own, so...”

“R-Right.” He wanted to gaze at Nephy being bashful for a while longer, but it was about time that Zagan’s heart was reaching its limits from feelings of guilt and shame.

And then, he noticed that Nephy’s pointy ears were bouncily shaking.

It was indeed embarrassing, but it seemed that she didn’t hate it all that much.

Somehow feeling relieved from that, Zagan then spoke up.

“Next time, make sure to prepare your own portion of food as well.”

“...Yes.”

“Well, I do not mind doing this again next time, either.”

“I shall make the preparations.” It was a resolute reply.

Zagan then reached out his hand to get some soup before it got cold, but Nephy had snatched the spoon from the side before he could.

“Nephy?” As Zagan knit his brows, the girl dressed as a maid scooped up some soup into the spoon.



After blowing on it gently to cool it down, she held it up to Zagan.

“By all means, please enjoy it, Master.” Her expression was as inorganic as always, but it somehow looked like she was angry.

So this is payback for just now?

However, be that as it may, the person doing it was also embarrassed about it. The tips of her ears were dyed red as if they were burning, and her hand, which was holding the spoon, was trembling slightly. Thinking of how she lovably blew on the soup to cool it down, rather than payback it felt more like a reward.

I feel like I want her to do this each and every time.

That was why Zagan opened his mouth and let her do as she pleased.

With awkward movements, Nephy carried the spoon over to his lips.

It seemed to be a mix of lamb meat and root vegetables boiled in milk, but after washing it down his throat, Zagan could feel a warm sensation spreading out from his stomach.

“It’s warm, huh?”

“Yes?”

“Ah, no, the soup, I mean!” Of course, there was also warmth from Nephy sitting atop his lap, but Zagan denied that in a fluster.

Nephy was staring at him blankly, but before long, she slowly nodded.

“...Yes. It’s... quite warm.” As if biting down on something, Nephy said that aloud.

It would be nice... if this kind of thing could continue forever.

And in her heart, she thought that to herself.



On this day, Nephy’s bedroom was finally spotless.

She insisted on doing the cleaning on her own, but it was difficult for her to carry over heavy objects like the furniture with her slender arms. That was why

Zagan had carried over things such as the bed and dressers.

Having said that, even now the only clothes she possessed were the dress she had on originally, the maid clothes, and a handful of underwear. Zagan wanted to provide her with a little more variety than that.

I have to put some proper thought into how to make money, I guess.

Selling his knowledge of sorcery was the most profitable method of making money, but it had the flaw that it was easy to trace back to him. Though it may have been possible when he was alone, if the church stepped in now and something were to happen to Nephy, it couldn't be undone even if he massacred his enemies.

In that case, just like the bandits' bodyguard from the other day, it would be quick and easy to get hired by someone, but that also had long hours, and there would be days on end where he couldn't return to the castle.

People always said that there were things that couldn't be purchased with gold, but it was reality that having no money left one living in want.

He still had some money left over from the reward he received for saving the carriage, so he wouldn't be troubled for food all of a sudden, but he still had to think of an immediate countermeasure.

And then, while continuing to clean the castle with Nephy, a few days had passed.

While Zagan was in the castle's archives, pouring over texts on sorcery that were spread out before him, Nephy asked him a question.

"Master, what have you been researching all this time?" Even while engrossed in his blissful life with Nephy, Zagan did not forget to devote himself to the study of sorcery.

Nephy handled things like cooking and cleaning flawlessly, so even if he helped her a bit, it was actually to the point where he was able to make more progress with his research.

In response, Zagan tilted his head to the side.

"Even if you ask what, does it look like anything but sorcery?"

“I do... believe that to be the case, but I don’t see the meaning in drawing such circles...” Hearing that, Zagan was left staring in wonder.

“Is elven sorcery different?” Nephy shook her head, and her snow-white hair swayed in the air.

“It’s because... I can’t use sorcery.” This was an unexpected response.

Even though she’s supposed to possess mana of far finer quality than most...

He thought it was a waste. However, that being the case, Zagan pointed out to the magic circle he was in the middle of drawing.

“This is called a magic circle. It is the ‘blueprint’ used by sorcerers to bring about phenomena as they will.”

“Blue...print?” It seemed that was vocabulary she had not heard before. And so, Zagan began explaining from the very start.

“Let’s see, for example, there are devices out there in town like water wheels and carriages, right? Those things are different from simple edged tools and hammers in that they’re made up of many components. If those components are not all assembled properly, then the device won’t function. The drawing which notes all the measurements and such to consolidate those components is called a blueprint.”

A carriage had the size of the wheels, the door, the seating made from many pieces of wood put together with nails, and metal fittings. A water wheel was even more complex, and the size and number of gears had to all be arranged correctly. This was not something that could be done with just practice. No, it was necessary to have a drawing that anybody could understand at a glance.

Nephy then nodded as she came to an understanding.

“Sorcery is not all that different. It all begins by drawing the blueprint — a magic circle, in our case.” While speaking, Zagan drew out a crest on the dust ridden ground.

“There is a notion that such crests possess power. The crest of a cross that is touted by the church is much the same. It is said that they are letters left behind by the gods, or proof of contract with the devil, but even I don’t know

what they actually are.” Or possibly, the mere belief that there was power or divinity there gave birth to power itself.

After touching upon sorcery, the laws of the world became ambiguous, and it became clear that it had a careless structure.

Next, Zagan enclosed the crest he drew with a circle.

“This... is the magic circle with the simplest form. This one brings about a flash of lightning, and upon having mana poured into it this happens.”

“Uh, what...” She likely didn’t think that he would activate it in this place, so a panicked voice leaked out of Nephy.

Even so, as Zagan touched the magic circle, a small crackling spark scattered about.

Having put herself on guard, Nephy blinked as if it were anticlimactic.

“This is... a flash of lightning?”

“Yeah. Having said that, it disperses into the air right away, so it doesn’t look like much in terms of lightning.”

“Haaa...” Seeing Nephy make an unsatisfied response, a smile seemed to creep up on Zagan’s face.

“With just this, it isn’t all that different from leaves floating on the surface of water. You can’t give birth to fire just by striking flint together, right? That’s why we add on crests to amplify the effect. Crests to give the power direction, crests to define the range, and crests which define the time of activation.” Just as when he drew the crest for lightning, Zagan continued to draw out several crests lined up together, then drew a circle around all of them.

“Now then, with this we can finally bring about a befitting phenomenon.” As he poured in mana, streaks of lightning struck down from the ceiling.

“Hyaaa.” Hearing Nephy let out a small yelp, Zagan laughed lightly.

“Sorry, sorry. However, thanks to this circle, anyone can use sorcery by pouring in the correct amount of mana. That’s why even if you draw a magic circle, there’s no meaning if your enemy steals it before you’re able to use it. It’s also why the next step is to add on constraints so only you are able to use

it.” In a manner of speaking, it was sorcery to protect sorcery.

The other day, when Barbatos intruded into the barrier and when Zagan nullified the effect of his enemy’s sorcery, it was done by overwriting this portion of the magic circle and stealing it.

“This thing has to be made complicated, or else it’ll be captured by another sorcerer right away. From here it is up to the skills of the individual. So, a magic circle with this sort of composition is called a ‘circuit,’ you see.” A sorcerer’s true strength was based on the efficiency of high level circuits, as well as the ability to protect the crests at its core.

It could also be said that replacing a magic circle with a spell was another show of strength.

After hearing all that, Nephy seemed to stare at the magic circle with deep interest.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, Master, you added the ‘circuit’ to the exterior. Is it possible to add it to the interior?” With a ‘Hooo,’ Zagan let out a sigh of admiration.

“That’s a good point to focus on. The answer is that it’s impossible, but also possible.”

“...What?” Nephy tilted her head to the side as if what he said was complete nonsense.

But Zagan continued on in a somewhat strange tone.

“For the time being, that would be like taking a completed magic circle and creating another magic circle within it. With that, the flow of mana will become chaotic and neither will activate, or it will spontaneously discharge. However, since sorcery itself is based on the flow of the power of mana, it should be possible in theory.” Nephy brooded over it a bit.

After that, she opened her mouth as if she wasn’t entirely convinced.

“Does that help further control the activated sorcery?” This time it was Zagan who opened his eyes wide.

“Correct. And if that could be done, it would mean that no sorcery could ever

be stolen.” All attacks born of sorcery would be simple nourishment for the one under attack. It was on a different level from hijacking a magic circle. It was like being able to play rock-paper-scissors after your opponent.

Not only that, sorcery could be activated without a problem and there would be no way to prevent it.

“In other words — in theory, it would be the ultimate form of sorcery.” Having said that, Zagan shrugged his shoulders.

“That is just a theory, though. If it was so easy to put into practice, nobody would go through hardships.”

“Oh...? It is said that sorcerers live long lives, and devote everything to the research of sorcery. But even so, it can’t be done?”

“Hmm, well, I’d say it’s more because nobody is seriously researching that theory.” Nephy tilted her head to the side as if what he said made even less sense than his previous statements.

“Listen, sorcerers are not dogs of war like soldiers or the Angelic Knights. They perform experiments out of a desire for things like immortality, or wanting to know how strong of a miracle they can create with sorcery, or finding out if it’s possible to resurrect the dead.” In other words, sorcerers only ever thought of themselves. They were a selfish breed.

People who did not recognize anything outside their own world, did not even sense the significance of competing with others.

“Naturally, there are those like the sorcerer yesterday who are hired by others or cooperate in wars. But that is only the means, not the end. They’re only doing that because proper research costs money. The only goal in their minds is how to make more so they can fund their research.”

Nephy opened her mouth like she was having trouble putting her thoughts into words.

“...I’ve heard before... that sorcerers torture people.”

“Yeah. There likely are idiots out there who do that as a distraction or to kill time. However, there aren’t any guys out there who study sorcery for that

alone. After all, there's a mountain of more efficient tools when it comes to torture." The history of torture devices was long. Procuring secrets by opening the mouths of others was a long-standing tradition.

They had been largely cleaned up, but even this castle was filled with a mountain of torture devices.

There existed sorcery out there which used the anguish and hatred of people as a catalyst, so it only made sense.

"Going back to the original topic, the ultimate sorcery I mentioned just now is something that would help you fight against other sorcerers. It may be of use in stealing the research of other sorcerers, but it doesn't have any use beyond that. That's why nobody bothers to research it."

Well, it's not like there aren't idiots out there who are seriously researching it, though...

Zagan decided that there was no meaning in talking about that and left it aside.

After having that much explained to her, Nephy then returned a convinced nod to him.

However, she still muttered something, as if not entirely satisfied.

"I feel like I understand the theory behind sorcery, but..."

"What? Let's hear it." In a somewhat curious tone, Nephy said the following.

"But, as long as one knows the structure, isn't anybody able to use it?"

Nephy seems to have a real head for sorcery, huh?

Surely, if it were not for that collar, she would likely have the makings of an outstanding sorcerer. Possibly one beyond Zagan.

Having that keenly pointed out, Zagan nodded as if praising a student who had done well.

"Yes, very good. When we sorcerers acquire knowledge, there is a direct connection to the power we acquire as well. How efficiently and effectively that can be used is up to individual skill, though." It wasn't like Zagan was a sorcerer

from the moment he was born.

The reason he became a renowned sorcerer at the young age of eighteen was because he stole the knowledge from 'a certain sorcerer.'

It's already been... ten years since then huh...?

It was something that happened when Zagan was eight years old.

Even so, it had nothing to do with the topic at hand. And after shaking his head, he continued speaking.

"That's why we set up a mountain of traps and tricks so that it cannot be stolen... Nephy, do be careful when you touch anything in this room, alright?"

"...Eek." Nephy sprang up in surprise upon hearing that.

"I'm kidding. It's set so the traps won't activate even if you touch them."

"...Master. That's mean." It was a delicate tone that was somehow reproachful and relieved at the same time.

Following that, the tips of Nephy's pointy ears twitched and quivered as if she were happy.

"Oh...? You look happy. Did something good happen?"

"Hyuuu?" As Zagan tilted his head to the side, Nephy jumped up and lost her presence of mind. She then touched her own face as if she found it strange.

"How... could you tell?"

"I mean, I can tell just by looking." This time, the tips of Nephy's pointy ears despondently drooped down, and then twitched and jumped back up in a cycle. She seemed to be both shaken *and* happy.

While covering her face, Nephy timidly looked up at Zagan through the gap in her fingers.

Honestly, he admired the fact that her base expression had not changed at all through this entire process.

After pausing for a bit, she bashfully said the following.

"Master, it's because this is the first time... You've talked to me so much..."

Zagan was aware that his own face had turned red. And, at the same time, he was tormented by a strong sense of regret.

It is, right!? I always only talk in that roundabout way, right!? Just as Zagan was troubled over being able to read Nephy's expression, she too was likely troubled over how she couldn't ever understand what he was trying to say.

After clearing out this throat with a cough, Zagan regained his composure.

"Well, I have nothing but sorcery after all. Since it's my field of expertise, my lips will loosen up a little."

"Yes." He didn't know just what she was convinced about, but Nephy nodded and he could somehow feel that she was happy even without looking at her ears.

After that, while showing slight signs of hesitation, Nephy opened her mouth to speak.

"Master, would you permit me a question?" When she stood on ceremony like that, it meant she had made the resolution to ask something in her own little way.

And so, Zagan corrected his posture as he nodded.

"What is it? Let's hear what you have to say."

"Master, it looks to me that you already possess great power. And yet, right now you're performing research to become even stronger." Pausing briefly there, after gulping down, the girl said the following.

"Master, what is it that you desire? What do you hope to gain by growing stronger?"

Zagan, was unable to immediately answer that question. *What do I desire...?* What would he wield that power for?

Nephy's expression clouded over as she waited for him to respond.

"My apologies. That wasn't something I should have asked."

"No, that's fine, really." While scratching the back of his neck, Zagan opened his mouth as if he was having trouble putting his thoughts into words.

“Honestly, I’ve never really thought of it.”

“Never... thought of it?” When she said it like that, it really did sound quite foolish.

As his gaze drifted into the air, Zagan nodded.

“If I had to say it, then to live... maybe?”

Nephy gulped at his words.

“To... live?”

“Yeah. When I was a brat, I didn’t have any money or a place to live, so I survived by stealing things. At the time, well, I couldn’t challenge adults or people with real power, but I still felt pretty lucky. I mean, I was still alive at least.” Now that he thought back on it, he thought they were all good people.

There were times that he was thrown into lockup, but even then he was at least given food, and was never threatened with death.

“And then one day, I was captured by a sorcerer. Even though I’m not an elf like you, kids are still reasonably good sacrifices.”

“Ah!” After saying that, he reflected on how thoughtless his words were.

Nephy was captured just like that only a short while ago.

Be that as it may, it would be unnatural to just stop talking here. And so, Zagan continued speaking at a slightly faster pace.

“Well, right on the verge of being killed I somehow found an opening and turned the tables on him. And then I realized that in order to survive, the only choice before me was to gain power. That’s why I wanted to become strong. If we’re talking desires, then that would be it. This may sound cliched, but it’s that little thing called immortality.”

Was she disappointed? Nephy pinned down her chest and hung her head.

“...I was... unable... to become... that strong.” Certainly, Zagan and Nephy’s circumstances may have been quite similar.

And because she never managed to gain power on her own, even now Nephy was looking down on herself.

Zagan then tried to boldly break the ice.

“Hey, Nephy.”

“Yes, Master.”

“If you’re interested in sorcery, then— Hm?” As he started to say that, Zagan’s expression turned grim.

“Is something the matter?”

“...Looks like we have uninvited guests. I’m going to go greet them, so I’ll leave dinner to you, Nephy.”

“As you wish. How many portions shall I prepare?”

“Just enough for me and you is fine. At any rate, that lot should leave right away.” Setting aside Nephy as she tilted her head to the side, Zagan left the archives behind him.

Without power, I cannot survive.

He bit down on his teeth as if he hated that fact as the thought crossed his mind.



“There’s a sorcerer’s dwelling in such a place...” A man raised his voice in bewilderment.

There were four people trespassing in the forest that spread out around Zagan’s castle. Three men, and one woman. The men were in their twenties to thirties and Zagan could tell that each of them was a skilled Angelic Knight. It was likely that the three of them were escorting the woman.

However, the one he sensed would be troublesome was the woman they were protecting.

Although she looked quite young, she was carrying a greatsword on her back. It was evident that her slender arms did not contain the strength needed to swing it around, but the girl was wearing equipment from the church called ‘Anointed Armor.’ Any who donned such armor would gain physical abilities rivaling that of a sorcerer.

Anointed Armor was certainly troublesome, but the bigger problem was that greatsword on her back.

The Angelic Knights of the church used swords which had a high resistance to sorcery, and they even had the ability to cleave apart the defenses of a sorcerer. However, what she was carrying was leaking an aura of power that was clearly on an entirely different level.

One of those rumored Sacred Swords, is it...?

He felt like he had seen the girl's face before, but with his attention drawn to the Sacred Sword, he failed to remember who it was.

One of the knights then grumbled.

"The true culprit behind the serial kidnappings, huh? To think he was lurking around in this kind of place."

"...That has yet to be made clear. We came here to ascertain that fact."
Hearing the Angelic Knights' conversation, Zagan came to an understanding.

Now that I think of it, Barbatos said that I was one of the suspects, didn't he?
And it seemed they traveled to his domain to attain the glory of subjugating the culprit.

It was fine and all that they were off the mark, but the church wasn't one to back off.

They declared the very existence of sorcerers evil. Even if he proved his innocence, the result wouldn't change. Zagan was a sorcerer. That was why he was an enemy they had to strike down.

In response to the girl, who raised her voice to remonstrate them, another one of the Angelic Knights let out a laugh.

"As one would expect of our Maiden of the Sacred Sword, Lady Chastille. You show such deep compassion, even for a sorcerer."

"We're proud to have been granted the honor of fighting alongside you, Lady Chastille." As the knights extravagantly praised her, the girl made a complicated expression. And eventually, they stopped walking and froze.

"It's this thicket again. We can't proceed further this way." It seemed they

were having difficulties with one of the barriers set up to avert intruders. Losing their sense of direction, they were spinning in circles.

Zagan was watching that scene from within the forest, highly amused.

The path that led to the castle stretched out before Zagan. The other day, he'd saved a girl being attacked by a sorcerer in the same area. And the knights were moving about in confusion at the branching path in that location.

While gazing at those knights, a doubt suddenly came to mind.

How did the sorcerer at that time... break through my barrier? It was a barrier that could even hinder Angelic Knights. It was impossible to get so deep out of sheer luck or chance.

Also, he didn't seem like a sorcerer who possessed enough power to break through Zagan's barrier. After all, he was the type of man who began begging for his life just from having Zagan confront him.

Well, regardless, Zagan's real problem was the Angelic Knights.

It'd be nice if they just gave up here and left... However, though it was obvious, they weren't such fickle opponents.

"Please step aside. It's likely a barrier made by sorcery. I will..." The girl stepped forth, drawing the greatsword at her back.

There was a crest design carved along the surface of the sword. It was quite different from the ones used in sorcery, but the theory was likely the same. If the crests of sorcery were similar to letters, then the one on her sword was from a different alphabet. And those crests gave off a pale shine.

"Here I go!" The girl's sword flashed through the air.

Shortly after her attack, Zagan could tell that the barrier covering the castle had crumbled. *Half of it... was destroyed, huh?*

Several of the pieces that fortified his strength still remained, but all the ones meant to drive away intruders had been destroyed from that single strike.

Since the barrier that was deceiving the eyes of the knights had been destroyed, Zagan had no choice but to meet them.

“...My goodness. Do the people of the church know naught of manners? You come to visit my home, and this is what you choose to do?” It seemed that line had finally alerted them to Zagan’s presence, so the knights raised their voices in a fluster.

The men stood in his way as an attempt to guard the girl, but she simply held them back with her hand.

After gazing straight at Zagan, she muttered in a somehow bitter voice.

“As I thought... it’s you.”

“I’m sorry, have we met?” He certainly did feel like he had seen her before, but...

After gazing at her face for a while longer, he finally remembered.

I see... It’s the girl who was about to be killed the other day, huh?

She was a considerable beauty, but at that time she hadn’t been carrying a Sacred Sword, and definitely was not wearing Anointed Armor. Currently, she also had her hair tied up, so her hairstyle was quite different.

Even so, if he remembered right, she possessed a pendant with a crest of the church.

If I knew she was an Angelic Knight, then I wouldn’t have just sent her back like that... He realized that he’d made a grave mistake. However, it would be unsightly to get hung up over that after so long. And so, Zagan simply decided to act like he didn’t know her.

“I don’t know who you are or where you’re from, but get lost. I’m busy here.” Zagan raised his finger quickly, as if they were simply irritating, then brought it straight down without a single warning.

“What?” Immediately following that, lightning rained down on the group. It was the same sorcery that reduced the last sorcerer he fought to ashes.

If they’re wearing Anointed Armor, then they likely won’t die.

The armor they were wearing had a extremely high defensive capabilities. If it were superficial sorcery, then it was even able to just reflect it. Even though he appeared rather brutal, Zagan was trying to hold back in his own way. However

—

“Launching a surprise attack, I see. As I thought, sorcerers are all just cowards at heart.” An Angelic Knight brandishing a large shield protected the girl. The girl that he was covering was one thing, but there was practically no effect even on the other knights.

Well, that’s only obvious. In the end, they were still a group who broke through Zagan’s barrier. If they weren’t capable of enduring such an attack, they never would have gotten so deep into his domain.

“...What a foolish lot. It would be fine if you simply ceased with such boring bluffs and returned home.”

Zagan suddenly squinted his eyes and said all that in such an overbearing manner that it was practically an attack.

If I don’t get this over with quickly, then I won’t make it back in time for the dinner Nephy’s making me! If he didn’t eat it while it was still fresh, then it would be bad for both Zagan and Nephy.

“Ugh...” Sensing that abnormal vigor, the girl took a step back.

As if filling up that opening, the Angelic Knight with the large shield stepped forth. Then, two more joined him.

“Lady Chastille, fall back. We Knights of the Azure Sky are more than sufficient for him.” Naming themselves with an exaggerated moniker, the knights faced off against Zagan.

Now that they mentioned it, Zagan noticed that the three of them were wearing blue armor.

The man who raised his voice was a considerably large man, and he gripped an axe in his right hand. Behind him was a tall and thin warrior carrying a spear, but further behind was someone with a longsword at the ready.

It seemed their tactic was to use the shield to wear out their opponent, stop their movements using the spear, and then use the longsword to deal the finishing blow.

It was quite the conventional strategy, all things considered, but it was widely

used because of how effective it proved to be. It could even be said that it was the perfect formation to face a lone opponent.

However, Zagan scratched his head as if it was simply tiresome.

“Look, will you head back home if I beat you black and blue?” Hearing that brief comment, which could be taken as provocation, the faces of the Angelic Knights were dyed with anger.

“You impudent whelp!” The one with the large shield charged in as he said that.

The shield and armor together likely weighed over a hundred kilos, but he was still charging in at the speed of a swift horse.

This was by no means possible for an ordinary human. No, the feat was only possible due to the power of the Anointed Armor, which all Angelic Knights wore.

Both the armor and the shield were baptized by the church and had crests inscribed on them. Half-hearted sorcery would be unable to pierce their defenses, and it wasn’t a situation where he had the time to invoke anything powerful, either.

“Fuhahaaa! I shall crush you before you can even use sorcery.” The large man’s shield was put forth as he charged in. It was like facing off against a cannonball. Even if he was a sorcerer, Zagan knew he would be turned into mincemeat by a direct hit. Plus, even if he endured the shield, the long spear behind it was lying in wait. And then, if he miraculously survived the attack from the spear, the longsword at the very end would be unavoidable.

Certain victory was in their grasp due to this method, but Zagan showed no signs of panicking. Instead, he just clenched his right hand.

He brandished that hand as if about to throw a stone, and then swung down toward the shield.

The fist and the large shield collided.

Forming a victorious smile, the knight yelled out.

“You fool, you’ll die h—” However, at the very moment, the large shield

shattered like glass.

Zagan's fist continued on and pulverized even the Anointed Armor as it dug into the Angelic Knight's stomach.

"What the...?" While making a face like he had no idea what happened, the Angelic Knight who was carrying the large shield was sent flying back at a speed beyond his initial charge.

Right behind him was the man with the spear, who had no chance to avoid being hit by the body of the man wearing 200 kilo armor.

"Shi—" Without even being able to scream, the second knight was also flattened.

The third man, who wielded a longsword, barely managed to escape, but his face had stiffened up as if he couldn't believe it.

"R-Ridiculous, that was the ultimate formation of the Knights of the Azure Sky..."

"...Listen, shouldn't you have at least looked into the person whose castle you're invading? If you investigated the kind of sorcery I use at all, then you wouldn't have gone with such a foolish strategy."

Zagan's fist had a detailed magic circle wrapped around it. He condensed all the power from the massive magic circle around his castle into that one spot.

Mana with high density carried mass. And it could reach a point where it had enough power to smash the church's Anointed Armor.

Furthermore, Zagan excelled at sorcery that helped defend himself. Even a fatal wound would be immediately regenerated, and if he had no chance at victory, he could run away at a speed beyond human comprehension. He had focused his research on reinforcing his physical abilities. And so, thrusting forth a shield, which was no more than a sheet of paper to him, was the height of stupidity.

Zagan then waved his hand as if driving away an insect.

"See, if you understand, then get lost already. Or what, do you plan to make that slender woman lug three pieces of dead weight around?" The last Angelic

Knight's face twisted with anger to the point where it felt like he could kill with just his gaze.

"Not yet! As long as I stand, victory shall be ours!"

"Hey, stop! Step aside!"

"I shan't step aside, Lady Chastille. UOOOOOOOOOH!" Holding his longsword aloft with both hands, the knight came cutting in straight from the front with an overhead strike.

Zagan gazed at him with cold eyes and swung his left hand toward it.

His hand, which was wrapped in the light of a magic circle, took on a shape akin to a blade from his two outstretched fingers.

The longsword and Zagan's fingers collided. And, as a sharp clang resounded, the longsword snapped down the middle.

After that, the man opened his eyes wide to the point where it felt like his eyes would fall out.

"Impossible... Urk." And then, Zagan stretched out his arm.

"Wh-What are you..." With a crack, Zagan flicked the Angelic Knight's bewildered brow. It was a prank he often pulled as a child.

"Ugh!" However, from that single strike, the back of the man's head slammed into the ground.

Zagan then mercilessly trampled on the nose of the man who was writhing on the ground.

"Hiigigigigi..."

"Do you get it now? If I apply just a little more pressure, your head'll be crushed like a tomato. The sound of the bones in your head creaking... is something you'll never forget. Even now, I can't say it's left my mind."

It was something that happened when he was captured by a certain sorcerer. Just like one who fell into despair due to being offered up as a sacrifice, Zagan was tortured.

That was why he knew just how much terror the sound conveyed. And while

speaking, he turned his attention to the girl.

“Hey now, don’t do anything unnecessary. Before you can even draw your sword, this guy’s brain will be splattered across the ground. I’m sure you wouldn’t be able to handle letting that happen when you have a chance to save him, right?”

“Sh-Shaaave... meee... AAAH!” As the Angelic Knight let out an unsightly scream, the girl removed her hand from the greatsword at her back.

What a sensible girl.

In truth, if the girl had assaulted him just like that, it would have been troublesome for Zagan.

The three Angelic Knights may have been worthless opponents, but a Sacred Sword was another matter entirely. Zagan’s fist would likely have been mercilessly cut apart, along with all the mana inside it. He was unsure he could win, even within his own domain.

After thinking for a moment, the girl glared at him.

“Tch... Why are you behaving like this is some sort of game. Do you intend to ridicule the defeated?” The eyes of the girl who said that were for some reason colored with more disappointment than anger.

Zagan then made an exasperated face like she should have known the answer.

“Do you know how to best make use of fear?”

“What...?” Chastille’s face grew increasingly vigilant.

Zagan had a need to make them feel fear. He had to make them see that it wasn’t worth it to challenge him, and that those who didn’t get involved would be safe. He had to drill that fear into the heads of not just them, but the people above them.

That was why he was going out of his way to torment them.

Zagan mercilessly trampled on the Angelic Knight, and planted seeds of fear within him.

“People fear the unknown. However, what spreads that fear is a person’s mouth. Even if I slaughter you all here, the people who sent you would only see it as a problem of numbers. To spread fear, there’s a need for you lot to survive and convey your experiences to them. Experiences just like this.” As he put more strength into his foot, the Angelic Knight beneath him let out a scream.

He was likely someone of considerable social standing, but with mud, tears, drool, and mucus wetting his entire face, he could only be described with a single word. Pitiful.

However, the girl then said the following.

“That’s, a lie.”

“Oh...?” Zagan opened one of his eyes wide as if he found what she said to be amusing.

“True, self-preservation is likely one reason you’re doing this. And speaking of the church, they probably would try again, with greater numbers, if you killed all of us. However, that is not your true motive.” Zagan’s body stiffened entirely.

If a corpse appears on the grounds, then Nephy will be frightened... That was why he wanted to turn them away without killing them.

Suddenly, the girl who seemed like she had seen through Zagan entirely smiled.

“...As I thought,” she said as she placed her hand to the greatsword at her back.

“Waith... I dond wand to die...” The Angelic Knight below Zagan’s foot begged for his life, but the girl did not remove her hand from that sword.

This is bad. She’s seen through the fact that I’m not interested in killing them.

A hostage only had meaning if one could use their life as a shield. If he had no interest in killing said hostage, then they were useless.

Eventually, the girl drew the holy sword from her back.

“Chastille Lillqvist. By my Lord’s command, I shall subjugate the sorcerer Zagan!”

Zagan knew he couldn't hold back against an opponent with a Sacred Sword. But even so, he was reluctant to kill a young girl about the same age as Nephy. Not only that, he knew killing someone he had once saved would leave him with a bad taste in his mouth.

In any case, despite her being a difficult opponent for him to fight, the girl — Chastille would not let him run away.

"Tch—" Zagan kicked away the man at his feet, who tumbled across the ground and bumped into the other two collapsed figures.

While he was doing that, Chastille rushed Zagan with her Sacred Sword in hand.

"HAAA!" She brought the Sacred Sword straight down on him.

Zagan brushed it off by hitting his fist against the flat of the blade, but—

"...Damn it." Just from that, a crack ran down the magic circle protecting Zagan's fist.

Even though he avoided the edge of the blade, simply touching it had reduced him to this state. Just thinking about what would happen if he were to be cut by it sent shivers down his spine.

Chastille then crouched and swung her sword upward. They were consecutive strikes like a flowing stream, and all Zagan could do was retreat.

But it doesn't appear to have all that much strength behind it...

The sharpness of the strike was considerable, but the blow itself was light. It likely meant that even if she had the divine protection of the Anointed Armor, there was a limit.

While swinging her sword, Chastille shouted at him.

"Why!? Why won't you counterattack!? Are you trying to say that I am not sufficient as an opponent!?" Zagan was, in fact, only dodging and had not aimed a single attack at her.

And while dodging a slash that came in horizontally by lying face down on the ground, Zagan replied.

“Don’t be unreasonable. Beating women isn’t really my specialty, you see.” Or rather, he had grown averse to it.

Beating a girl at about the same age as Nephy is a little...

It wasn’t that he was worrying about whether Nephy would end up hating him. No, whenever he clenched his fist, that lovely girl’s face would float across his vision. There was no way he could calmly punch a similar girl just because she wasn’t Nephy.

That was why he was searching for another method to get by without hitting her.

With a creak, Chastille ground her teeth.

“Why did someone like you stain your hands with sorcery?” Rather than anger, it sounded like she was lamenting his lot in life.

That made Zagan tilted his head to the side.

“I don’t know what you’re saying, but is it that bad to use sorcery?” He was aware that people thought him a villain, but the idea of sorcery being to blame felt odd to him.

Chastille then yelled out furiously.

“It’s evil! Because that power exists, the people are oppressed and made to suffer.”

“Then what exactly is the power you’re using? Isn’t it the power to unilaterally kill a sorcerer who is weaker than you?”

“Ugh...” Having that pointed out to her, even Chastille’s face showed signs of unrest, and the Sacred Sword she swung missed its mark and sank into the ground.

Then, without pause, Zagan stomped on it.

If he could pin the sword down, even someone with Anointed Armor would have problems pulling it back out.

“Urgh...” As the girl groaned, Zagan gazed at her indifferently.

“I don’t have any intention of justifying myself, but there are a mountain of

people who wouldn't be alive if not for sorcery. Anyone who tramples those people underfoot and treats them as prey... isn't upholding any sort of justice."

"Ah..." Even this girl seemed to be forcing herself to malign him, so she likely understood his true intentions.

Having turned pale, she couldn't say anything back.

Oh, come on. Don't react like that. It'll just make it even harder to hit you... Dammit...

If she screamed out in an unsightly manner that she was just, then Zagan would have been able to hit her without worrying about it.

Even so, Chastille bit down on her lip and put all her strength into the hand gripping her sword.

"Still... No, precisely because that's true, I cannot afford to lose!"

"Ugh, whoa there." The girl pulled out the Sacred Sword using sheer strength. And since Zagan was stepping on it, he lost his footing.

"There!" Chastille unleashed a thrust with all her might.

Unfortunately, your technique is far too crude.

Without getting out of the way, Zagan clapped his hands together on the spot. And as he did, he splendidly caught the tip of the blade.

The protection of his magic circle cracked. The palms of his hand were hot, as if they were being burned. Despite that, however, Zagan returned a ferocious smile to her.

"Are you good at contests of strength?"

"I accept your challenge!" Far from stepping aside, Chastille put her entire weight into pushing the weapon forward.

The crest that was engraved on the Sacred Sword was shining to the point where it was blinding, and as if hailed by that, her Anointed Armor was also wrapped in light.

"What?" It was somewhat unbelievable, but the girl lifted up her Sacred Sword along with Zagan's body.

This girl... was hiding a trump card all along? Just as Zagan was taking a wait and see attitude, Chastille seemed to have been hiding her true strength.

And then, she swung her Sacred Sword down just like that.

“This damn— Ugh?” Such a dainty girl managed to swing a lump of steel with a human attached to it. It was somewhat difficult to believe.

Choosing not to endure it, Zagan let go. That sent him crashing into a tree behind him, where he choked on his breath.

She’s wielding more power than me... inside my own barrier? It was true that a barrier didn’t have much meaning against an Angelic Knight, but it wasn’t like Zagan himself had lost his reinforced power.

Even though it was due to the power of a Sacred Sword and her Anointed Armor, Chastille’s pure physical strength overwhelmed Zagan.

Zagan checked his hands, which had just touched the sword, as he got up.

His skin was festered from the burns. Even though he started healing them with sorcery, the regeneration was slow. This was likely also the power of a Sacred Sword.

Back then... I really should have killed her, huh?

As one would expect, he felt awkward about killing a defenseless woman, but he knew he should have been more cautious about getting involved with someone from the church.

While he was groaning, Chastille came rushing in once more.

Zagan somehow managed to immobilize the sword, which was coming down from overhead, but the large tree at his back smashed to pieces with a loud sound.

If it wasn’t Zagan, or perhaps if he were not within his own barrier, he would have been crushed just like that tree.

A sigh leaked out of his lips. If it had come to this, then there was no other option.

I’ve got no other choice now... Shall I kill her?

He had the option of running away. However, Nephy was back at the castle. If Zagan ran away, then Nephy would be attacked. The church executed all who allied themselves with sorcerers, after all.

It seemed that breaking a Sacred Sword was impossible even with Zagan's power. However, it wasn't like there wasn't anything else he could do.

And then, just as he gathered power into both his hands to unleash utter destruction...

(Stay like this and listen to me, bastard. Can you pretend to die by my hand?) Zagan unintentionally opened his eyes wide in shock as he heard that.

Shifting his gaze over to behind the girl, Zagan noticed that the three Angelic Knights he'd beaten had begun to get up. *Is she trying to make sure they don't hear her?*

(What are you planning?)

(The church won't give up on killing you. If I lose here, someone stronger than me will be sent over next. Make it so you died here. And then throw away that damned sorcery and live as an ordinary person.)

Zagan doubted his ears.

(Didn't expect to hear such words from the mouth of an Angelic Knight.)

(...You didn't kill my subordinates. And even if you say you're trying to instill fear in them, your eyes are colored with something like affection.)

Her words were difficult for Zagan to accept.

I looked like that? Zagan didn't know that his feelings for Nephy came off in that manner.

He naturally wasn't pointing it toward his opponents, but Chastille had seen through the fact that there was someone that Zagan wanted to protect.

And then, Chastille said the following.

(Above all, I have not forgotten... that you're my savior.) Saying that, Chastille made a truly apologetic face.

(...Sorry. This... is about all I can do.) It seemed this girl didn't just forget the

fact that Zagan had saved her.

This was not the first time Zagan had faced Angelic Knights. However, it was the first time he met one who would mourn a sorcerer's death.

This girl... must have it hard huh...?

If an Angelic Knight protected a sorcerer, it wouldn't just end with their status being stripped.

They would be declared a traitor, have any and all human rights stripped from them, and would end up being tortured and executed in a way that made one hesitate to even try and describe it. For a girl as beautiful as Chastille, rape was also inevitable.

She didn't appear to be stupid enough not to know that. And so, those words were likely not spoken out of feeble resolve.

It had become even harder to attack her thanks to that.

But... I can't really do that, huh?

If Zagan did just as Chastille said, he could likely get away safely. It made sense too, since there weren't any worthwhile assets left in the castle.

However, he knew it would be impossible to save Nephy if he went that route.

If they searched the castle, they would find her. And Nephy would definitely not run away. That girl didn't have any real will to live, after all.

Right as he was worrying about what to do...

"Master!" Nephy, who should have been left back at the castle, called out to him.

As Zagan turned around, a girl dressed like a maid was running over toward him.

Perhaps because Zagan was late in returning, or perhaps because she sensed some trouble, she chased after him.

"Stay away, Nephy!"

"Eh, a girl...?" Chastille spoke in a bewildered tone.

That was also the moment both of them showed an opening at the same time.

“Screeeeeewing around with us!” Among the three fallen Angelic Knights, the man with the spear stood up. Unlike the other two, he had only suffered minor injuries.

After looking around, his eyes stopped on Nephy, who was running over to them.

“The sorcerer’s companion, eh!?” What exactly was he thinking? He brandished his spear on Nephy, who was rushing over.

“Stop it, Torres!” Chastille raised her voice to restrain him, but the Angelic Knight threw his spear.

“Move!” Zagan thrust away Chastille, then rushed in front of Nephy.

However, Zagan knew that Nephy wouldn’t get off lightly if he pushed her aside with his power as it was. He tried to gently wrap her into his arms, but he ended up surrendering himself to the spear instead.

“Tch—” Zagan pushed out his left hand to use as a shield.

The tip of the spear pierced through his palm, accompanied by the sound of meat and bone being crushed.

“Master!” Nephy let out a sorrow-filled shriek.

Still, Zagan somehow managed to stop the spear with just his hand.

“It’s alright. Something like this... is just a scratch.” As Zagan spoke, sweat faintly ran down his brow.

He was wounded in the same area where his healing abilities were obstructed, so his left arm was likely useless for a while.

With a drip, blood slowly fell to the ground.

It had been quite a while since he had seen his own blood.

Don’t get carried away... you piece of shit...

However, Zagan was unable to hurl out that abusive language.

From within his arms, he could feel a shivering cold.

“You wounded... my master, right?” Zagan didn’t immediately realize that Nephy was the one speaking.

It was a cold voice that he would never have expected to hear from that sweet and languid girl’s mouth.

And immediately following that...

“Eek, what is this?”

People often said that a forest was alive. That generally came up when all living things in the place moved at once, and the trees swayed from a strong wind.

However, there were no animals running about. And there was no wind, either.

And yet, the forest still felt alive.

The animals were gathering deep in the forest. There were small squirrels, ferocious wolves, and wild boars, among others. Without raising a single cry, they were all staring fixedly at the Angelic Knights.

It wasn’t like the trees were swaying, either. Instead, the leaves and branches themselves began stretching out, and thorny shrubs were extending from the thickets.

The forest was alive, acting as if it had a will of its own. And something, perhaps the forest’s malice, was staring at the Angelic Knights.

What exactly... is this? It wasn’t sorcery. After all, Nephy had a collar that sealed sorcery on her neck, so she couldn’t possibly be using any. Having said that, it clearly also wasn’t the power of the church.

If one was forced to explain it...

Is she... manipulating the forest itself? It was completely different in terms of scale and quality when compared to Zagan’s sorcery. A cold sensation ran down his spine.

This was likely also the case for the Angelic Knights.

Faced with that mysterious power, the one who threw the spear began to tremble.

“No... S-Stop, AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” The man Chastille had called Torres ran away.

“I won’t let you escape.” Nephy stretched out her arm.

Ivy crawled out from beneath his feet, entwining them.

“Ugh!” Rough tree roots crawled toward Torres as he fell over. They writhed around like a living being, swallowed his body, and began dragging him into the ground.



The power was terrifying, and looking closely, Zagan noticed that cracks were forming on Torres' Anointed Armor.

Zagan finally came to his senses upon hearing the sound of bones breaking.

"Enough! That's plenty... Stop that, Nephy." Nephy brought her hand to a stop as he embraced her. She was clearly surprised.

Luckily, it seemed Torres was just barely breathing.

Is this... Nephy's power...? Was it something characteristic of elves? Or could she use it because of her unique existence, which was outwardly displayed by her snow-white hair?

Whatever the case, that power surpassed even sorcery, and it was something Zagan had absolutely no knowledge of.

Chapter IV: Unrequited Love is Something That Can Even Physically Hurt

Chastille and the other Angelic Knights had retreated.

The three who were with her were knocked out, so Zagan mended his barrier and threw them out on his own. He figured Chastille would likely somehow manage the rest on her own.

“I’ve gotten someone unrelated involved in this. Sorry.” Right until the end, the girl kept repeating phrases like that.

After returning to the castle, Nephy began treating Zagan’s wound. She seemed used to it, which surprised Zagan. After a bit, he began to question the girl who was skillfully tending to his wounds.

“Nephy, I thought you couldn’t use sorcery?” With a twitch, Nephy’s body shook.

“That wasn’t... sorcery.”

“Then what was it?”

“You see...” Nephy’s expression soured. Her face itself didn’t change all that much, but the tip of her pointy ears feebly drooped down.

Upon noticing that, Zagan shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, whatever. The kind of power you possess isn’t important to me.” Of course, he didn’t know whether it was sorcery or anything else, but if she possessed some sort of power, why didn’t she resist when she was captured? Why didn’t she break her collar? Why didn’t she think of just running away from Zagan? There was a mountain of questions that bothered him.

However, nothing that had happened changed his opinion of her... was what he wanted to convey to her, but...

Crap! When I put it like that, doesn’t it sound like I don’t give a damn about

her!?

It was clear that the way he worded his thoughts had betrayed his feelings. Seeing Nephy droop her shoulders more visibly, Zagan went on to correct himself.

“You are Nephy, and nothing can change that. No matter what power you possess, you’re still the same.”

I said it properly! He felt like it was still somewhat difficult to understand, but nevertheless, Nephy stared back at him in wonder and surprise.

“...Thank you... very much.” Her drooping ears quivered with a twitch.

For whatever reason, it seemed that she was a little more at ease... Though it was still questionable whether Zagan’s intentions were made clear or not.

While they were talking of such things, she finished wrapping the bandages. Zagan still felt pain, but he could still move his hands around at the very least. Thanks to that, he knew he likely wouldn’t have any issues following his daily routine. To a certain extent, he could even endure combat.

If it wasn’t for the power of the Sacred Sword, he would have healed such minor wound immediately, but Nephy’s first aid treatment was perfect.

“Mm... Not bad. Well done.” “...No, it was... my fault... after all.” This time around, he thought she would obediently thank him, but Nephy hung her head in shame.

Zagan truly wished someone had taught him words of comfort that he could use in such a situation. He was even seriously considering pulling out Barbatos’ tongue and transplanting it to himself.

After worrying to the point where it felt like his brain would boil, Zagan finally managed to squeeze out some words.

“Aah... Were you... scared?”

“Are you... asking me?” And contrary to expectations, she made a face that clearly displayed her surprise.

That expression made Zagan feel that he’d touched a sore spot. After he groaned, Nephy timidly opened her mouth to speak.

“Master, do you not think... that I am... creepy?”

“Why?” If anything she seemed even more charming to him as of late, as tiny hints of her feelings leaked through onto her face. What exactly was creepy about that?

When Zagan earnestly tilted his head to the side, Nephy repeatedly looked up at his face and cast her eyes back down.

And then, she muttered something, clearly mustering all her courage to do so.

“Why...? Because of... the power... earlier...”

“Oh, yeah. That was something I’ve never seen before. I’m quite interested in it, actually.” In fact, he thought that Archdemon Marchosias bought her because of that power.

As he said that, Nephy spoke up in a curious tone.

“Is that... all?”

“Hm? I do believe I said that I didn’t intend to use you as a lab rat.”

“I... understand that, but that is not what I...” It seemed that she finally believed in his goodwill, at least.

He was honestly happy about that, but Nephy’s bewilderment only deepened.

Before long, perhaps resigning to the fact that they were making no progress, Nephy combed her snow-white hair upward and began talking.

“That power... is not sorcery... It’s called ‘mysticism.’”

“Mysticism... you say?” Zagan had heard the term before.

It was not a technique developed by accumulating the theories and definitions of sorcery. No, with mysticism, just wishing for something interfered with the laws of nature, and depending on the situation, it was said that it could even resurrect the dead.

It truly was a miracle that surpassed human intellect.

He never thought he would witness it in action with his own two eyes, so Zagan stared at Nephy in wonder.

“So it *is* real... Can all elves use that power?”

Nephy shook her head at his words.

“No. It’s because... I’m a cursed child.” Nephy repeated the words she hesitated to say when they first met. And Zagan stared at her fixedly, waiting for her next words to follow.

“I have... this strange power. Yes, it’s... a power that shouldn’t exist. Children with white hair who possess this power... should never have been born... That’s why...” Her azure eyes reflected no emotions at all as she said that. No tears ran down her cheeks, either.

You aren’t a person. You aren’t permitted to have an opinion. You aren’t even allowed to have a will of your own. They were the eyes of one who was told such things.

She’s been through a lot, huh...?

Once again, Zagan didn’t know what to say to comfort her. And Nephy, expressionless like a doll, continued speaking.

“In our village, when humans attacked, I was asked to use my power, but...”

As the sound of Zagan gulping resounded, Nephy turned completely pale and confessed her sin.

“Pay back the debt of being allowed to live... When I heard them say that, I felt something snap inside my head.” With a trembling voice, she continued speaking.

“I did not... resist at all... and was captured by the humans. That was... my revenge... against everyone in the village.”

Zagan thought her actions made complete sense. In fact, in his eyes, anyone willing to protect those that had been persecuting them had a few screws loose. Honestly, why did those people even believe she would rush to their defense? It seemed they were far too arrogant.

“Everyone... ran away, looking extremely desperate. There were only a few who were captured, and everyone else was either cut down by swords or burned by sorcery. I assume no one managed to get away. Even the corpses of

elves are useful, after all.” Nephy’s lips warped into the shape of a smile.

“Seeing that, the only thought that came to mind was ‘it serves you right.’” Her voice was trembling.

“Cruel of me, right? I... watched everyone die as they cursed me, and was laughing from the bottom of my heart. ‘This time... it’s your turn to suffer,’ I said.” After finishing her story, Nephy’s face returned to its neutral state once more.

“After all that happened, I realized just how despicable I was. I understood that I was a person who could calmly laugh while watching others die.”

As he said that, a sigh leaked out of Zagan’s lips.

I see. So that’s why Nephy lost her ability to make any expressions...

Because she hated herself, she ended up denying her own emotions.

However, Zagan believed that her actions only served to prove how much virtue this girl had.

Having held nothing back, Nephy sank to the floor despondently.

“I’m sorry. I’m... disgusting, aren’t I...?”

“Why?” As Zagan tilted to his side like he truly found her question odd, Nephy blinked as if she doubted her ears.

“U-Uh, what? No, I mean...” “Isn’t that much... just normal? If it was me, I would have massacred the people of the village. Yeah, I would’ve teamed up with the invading humans. Since you didn’t do that, I think you’re extremely kind, Nephy.” He was not bluffing when he said that.

No, he truly would do it. He would even kill a cute young girl like Chastille if he had to. That was to say nothing of those who brought harm to him. It was difficult to even find a reason to let those people live at all. He would have happily slaughtered them all.

And if they were from the village who tormented Nephy, then he would have even thrown in torture as a free bonus.

Nephy then made an even more bewildered face.

“Is that... how it is?”

“Yeah. When you were speaking down to those damn Angelic Knights earlier, you were real scary, you know? If you can do that much, you should have been able to strike all those elves down without a problem.” Saying that, Zagan thrust his finger toward Nephy.

“Moreover, Nephy, you seem to be misunderstanding something.”

“I-I am?”

“That’s right. You’re thinking of ‘mysticism’ as something evil, but there is no good or evil when it comes to power. Are there any idiots out there who think a blade knows of good or evil? I’d say the only ones who do are people who don’t wield them.”

Perhaps overwhelmed by Zagan’s vigor, Nephy nodded quickly and repeatedly. Even so, her ears were still drooping down.

“But I think... what I did... cannot be forgiven.”

“Who doesn’t forgive you?”

“Th-That’s... Everyone... in the... village.”

“Aren’t they dead? Forget about them. There’s no way for them to keep complaining at this point.”

With a pop, Nephy’s mouth opened.

“You hear me, Nephy? People can’t survive on kind thoughts alone. If you possess power, then use it and live. If you don’t, then you’re just disrespecting the powerless masses who have already passed away.”

As if biting down on the meaning behind those words, Nephy patted her chest.

“Is it really okay... for me to possess... power?”

“Then let me ask you, is it bad to possess power? Is it evil to desire strength?”

“That’s...” Nephy couldn’t reply, so Zagan gently chimed in like an affectionate father.

“By the way, most people consider me evil.” Upon hearing those words,

Nephy stiffened up.

“...Huh?” In response to that shocked girl, Zagan spoke as if he was looking back on nostalgic memories.

“I don’t remember who it was, but they told me that I, who could do anything on my own, couldn’t possibly understand their feelings. That the strong could not understand the feelings of the weak.” If he recalled correctly, it was an extraordinarily pitiful, yet cute, young girl who was escaping from a bandit attack, got lost in Zagan’s domain, and triggered a trap.

It happened around the time Zagan had started acquiring power as a sorcerer. He felt lonely, so he also had the ulterior motive of maybe getting along if he were to save her. But still, he believed that he was really trying his best to save someone in need.

Zagan drove away the bandits and saved her from the trap, but the only thing that girl had to say in return was the following.

“Is it wrong for the weak to live? Do you feel good showing off your power?”

He regretted saving her. And, at the time, he felt like vomiting as the girl ran away from him.

Thinking back on it, he understood that the girl was just frustrated and wanted to vent her anger. Still, that incident just made him distrust strangers even more.

Pity and kindness were naught but poison that corrupted people. And so, that girl hated being submerged in such a lukewarm feeling.

Saving people had absolutely no meaning beyond self-satisfaction.

Trampling the weak underfoot was a matter of course. They were worthless, after all.

There’s no way... I would understand the feelings of the weak.

As if spitting out bitter memories, Zagan spoke.

“It’s obvious. I became strong *because* I didn’t want to be like those people.” The weak dragged down others with them.

The thought of some stranger saving you in your time of need was pathetic.

Relying on someone, when even a parent would abandon their child, was the same as inviting them to take advantage of you. That was why Zagan desperately sought power and became stronger.

Well, there was nothing at the end of that road, though.

After desperately seeking strength for so long, he came to realize that people did not deserve his trust.

Being called superior sounded and felt nice, but it was also worthless. Even so, he could believe in himself.

If it would help him survive, then he would gladly accept it.

Zagan laughed at himself.

I say that, but I lost my cool just because Nephy's feeling a little down...

Even he found this fact humorous. Still, even if he had been avoiding people for so long, he couldn't help but find the girl in front of his eyes lovely.

While spitting out that love was a mere fabrication, he loved someone else from the bottom of his heart.

This was his first bit of romantic experience.

He knew the contradiction could bring him to ruin one day, but even then, he wanted to accept those feelings.

That was why Zagan desperately wove a few clumsy words together.

"That's why, Nephy, don't worry about other people." Touching Nephy's white cheek with his hand, without even knowing what he should say, he put all his effort into expressing his feelings.

"So... don't make that face. I told you before... that I need you, right?"

Her azure eyes shook as she heard his words. And then, her slender fingers squeezed Zagan's hand.

"Is it alright... for me to... stay here?"

"Of course it is. You've fed me such delicious food. I can't even imagine living

without you at this point.” He wondered if talking about food was appropriate, but right as he uttered those words, he realized none of that mattered.

With a drip, tears ran down Nephy’s cheeks.

“N-Nephy?”

“Uwah... Hic...”

As Zagan let out a bewildered voice, Nephy clung to Zagan’s chest and began to sob.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.” And then she raised her voice and screamed.

Zagan said nothing, choosing instead to stroke her head until her tears ran dry.

After calming down and composing herself, Nephy hung her head and crumpled her apron in her hands.

“...Um, I’ve shown you... something embarrassing.”

“I don’t mind. This is the first time I’ve seen you talk so much, Nephy.” As he said to tease her, the tip of Nephy’s ears went red.

“Master, that’s mean.”

After she said that, Nephy lowered her gaze to Zagan’s hand. It was the hand that was petting Nephy’s head until just moments ago.

“Master, does your hand... not hurt?”

“Hm? Now that you mention it...” Before he knew it, he’d stopped feeling the pain.

It wasn’t like he lost his senses, so why? As he tilted his head to the side, Nephy took that hand in her own.

“Master, excuse me.” Saying that, she began unraveling the bandages that she had previously wrapped for him.

And as she did, what did she find? The wound, which still had traces of blood on it mere minutes ago, had vanished without a trace.

Seeing this, even Zagan opened his eyes in astonishment.

“Nephy, did you do that?”

“I don’t know... But... probably.” She most likely didn’t know because it had happened unconsciously.

Since she’d been bullied by her fellow villagers, the thought of healing the wounds of others had probably never entered her mind.

“How surprising.” It seemed mysticism even surpassed the power of a Sacred Sword.

“Wow, this is amazing.”

“Is... that so...?”

“Yeah. Thank you, Nephy.” Nephy’s eyes widened as he honestly expressed his gratitude.

“What’s wrong?”

“Master, this is the first time... you’ve said such a thing to me.” Even Zagan was left perplexed by that phrase.

Up until now, I’ve never said that single phrase, ‘thank you,’ even once, have I?

Even though Nephy had been doing everything she could to prepare his meals and take care of his castle...

“...Oh, about that... Sorry.” As Zagan said that, the tips of Nephy’s ears quivered, showing her joy.

“I belong to you after all, Master.” It very likely was not his imagination that her voice sounded happy.

That feeling of loneliness, which had once spread throughout Zagan, was nowhere to be found.



Midnight. For as far as he could remember, it was the time Zagan immersed himself in research, but lately it had turned into the time of sleep. Since Nephy followed a rather normal schedule, Zagan ended up getting used to it to suit her.

With his elbow propped up on the throne, he surrendered himself to drowsiness. However, a knock against the door to the room then rang out.

“Nephy? What’s wrong at this kind of hour?”

Normally, Nephy would already have been asleep at such a late hour. She may have just been thirsty, but that was the first time she descended from the spire and traveled all the way to the throne room so late at night.

As Nephy entered, he noticed her white nightgown, which made the fact that she’d already gone to bed once clear. The way she was carrying a fluffy looking pillow in her arms was so adorable that it felt like Zagan would lose all reason.

While still embracing the pillow, Nephy timidly opened her mouth to speak.

“Um, Master...”

“Hm?” Seeing that she seemed to be standing on ceremony, Zagan straightened himself up.

And before long, Nephy resolved herself and spoke up.

“Would it be... fine... to sleep together?” Not just her ears, but even her face turned red as she said those words.



And Zagan's face stiffened up in turn.

I'm a man, and Nephy is a woman, so when she says sleep together, it means...! Zagan swallowed his saliva with a gulp.

Even he was a man. The thought of wanting to mess up such a lovely girl's soft and fair skin had passed through his mind numerous times.

However, if he surrendered himself to lust even once and hurt Nephy, Zagan would surely never recover from it. That was why he had restrained himself thus far.

And now Nephy has come to give herself to me!? Considering the possibility that he heard wrong or that it was a mere slip of the tongue, Zagan calmed himself down as he asked her to repeat herself.

"Nephy, do you understand the meaning of what you just said?"

"...Yes." She was likely also quite nervous. And so, with tears even forming in her eyes, she frankly spoke her mind.

"There is only one bed... in this castle after all." And as he was about to yell out in delight, Zagan tilted his head to the side.

Hm? Hold on, that's a weird way to put it... Certainly, if one were to think of any sort of proper bed in this castle, then only Nephy's came to mind. Anything else was either broken or too dirty, and Nephy put forth her best effort to tuck them all away.

Of course, he didn't object to the idea of them clinging to each other in Nephy's room, but he felt like that wasn't what she was trying to say.

While considering that for several seconds, he realized that he couldn't get to the heart of the problem on his own, so he prodded her for further details.

"M-Meaning...?"

Nephy also seemed to have realized that her explanation was insufficient, and after biting her lip bashfully, she began explaining from the start.

"Master, you always sleep on this throne."

"Well, that's right."

“I believe lying down while resting... would maybe make you feel... more at ease.”

However, even if he wanted to lie down, the only bed was Nephy's. *In other words... Hm? Then this isn't about giving up her body or anything?* As Zagan put on an utterly confused face, Nephy finished what she was saying.

“As such... how about... sleeping... together...” Her face was already bright red to the point where it felt like a fire would start.

Zagan thought that he was probably making the exact same kind of face at that point.

You're too pure, dammit... In other words, it seemed she didn't mean that she wanted them to enter a physical relationship. No, she simply wished to share a bed. Still, that felt rather inadequate, given his previous expectations...

The feeling of lust from having his hope raised so high and the feeling of wanting to purely accept Nephy engaged in a tug-of-war. And at the end of that conflict, Zagan arrived at a rather odd answer.

“Hear me, Nephy. I am grateful for the thought, but this room is the cornerstone of my barrier. It is the most convenient place to deploy countermeasures in case of intruders.” It felt like tears of blood would gush out of his eyes. However, that was also the truth.

Those damn Angelic Knights just barged in here in the afternoon, after all. Normally, he wouldn't have fussed over it so much, but he truly felt he couldn't afford to be negligent.

It was easy to feel relaxed right after repulsing intruders, so the probability of a second wave coming in to aim for that window was high.

That was why Zagan needed to be perched in the room to take immediate action.

However, Nephy nodded as if she'd already predicted his answer.

“I thought... that might've been the case, so...” Nephy sat down atop the carpet, and spread out her arms.

“Please, go ahead... and use my lap.”

A lap... pillow? He didn't expect that development. Moreover, seeing that she'd even brought her pillow with her, she seemed intent on staying the entire night. Zagan was doubting whether or not he would just up and die from happiness.

Seeing as Zagan was unable to make a prompt decision, Nephy began waving her spread out arms to beckon him over. It seemed that it was too embarrassing to say again, so she was trying to motion him to quickly come over.

There's no way I can refuse such an invitation...! He felt like gazing at Nephy for just a while longer, but Zagan immediately stood up from his throne, having run out of patience.

"I-I see. Then, shall I leave it to you?" Faltering as he sprawled out on the ground, he entrusted his head to Nephy's lap.

It was a carpet that was walked upon with shoes, but because Nephy had washed it and scrubbed it clean, it was even softer than any ordinary blanket. And because of the body warmth from her tender thighs, a strange sense of tranquility overpowered his lust.

Nephy stared at him fixedly as his head lowered onto her lap.

"How... is it?"

"N-Not... bad." Nephy's face was blocked by her gigantic breasts as Zagan looked up at her from below. He could still make out half of her face, but he was honestly unsure where to look.

Eventually, Nephy began awkwardly stroking Zagan's head.

Zagan's gaze only began wandering about even more because of the ticklish and somewhat comforting feeling. And, as if regaining his composure, he cleared his throat.

"However, why this all of a sudden?" Nephy averted her gaze at once, as if bewildered, and then spoke in a whisper.

"Master, even when... you learned about my mysticism, you told me it was alright for me to stay here. That's why... I want to show my gratitude..."

somehow..." Expressing such thought and feelings was a first for her. And understanding just how delighted she was made Zagan content as well.

Remaining sprawled out on the floor, Zagan stretched out his hand to her cheek.

"You're always helping me out in so many ways... Really, there's no need for us to express gratitude so formally."

"...Understood." Nephy nodded bashfully.

Zagan then remembered that there was something that he failed to mention to her. Because the Angelic Knights came by, he didn't get to say it.

"Hey, Nephy."

"Yes." Zagan spoke his mind as she nodded her head at him, a blank expression on her face.

"Do you want to try... learning sorcery?" Nephy blinked twice, then her eyes shot open in surprise.

"Me... learn sorcery?"

"Yeah. I think you have a knack for it. Besides, you can't control that 'mysticism' or whatever from this afternoon, right?" At the moment, she was unable to use sorcery with the collar sealing her mana. However, she was able to manifest mysticism even with it on.

If he left her alone back then, the Angelic Knights that Nephy attacked would likely have been torn to pieces. Plus, she'd also healed Zagan's wound. If she could more consciously control it, then there was a good chance that she'd eventually grown strong enough to wound even Zagan.

"It's a power with a different structure, so simply studying sorcery won't necessarily help you control mysticism. However, you should at least be able to defend yourself with it for now." He'd faced some setbacks, but Zagan hadn't given up on removing her collar. That was why he wanted to prepare her for the day she was unshackled.

And, as if unable to hide her bewilderment, Nephy's eyes shook.

"W-Would I... really be able to do it...?"

“You can. Nephy, you’ll definitely become a far stronger sorcerer than me.”

Originally, the elves were a race that stored powerful mana within themselves. With that, alongside Nephy’s senses, even the Archdemon’s seat was in sight.

Nephy then tightly clutched her chest.

“Will I... be able to reach a point where I’m useful to you, Master?”

“You’re already... more than useful to me.” It wasn’t just about her managing his daily affairs. Little by little, he had been able to show more emotion, and every day they would meet face to face and have a conversation. He truly felt that he had gained something irreplaceable thanks to all that.

“Will I also... become like you, Master?”

“Uh... In terms of power, right? If possible, I’d like everything else about you to remain the same.” Sure, he wished to teach her sorcery, but it was a little troublesome for her to look up to a villain like Zagan. He wanted to see many more of her expressions, but he also felt like he wanted Nephy to stay the same.

“Will I... be able to assist you, Master?”

“You protected me from those damn Angelic Knights, didn’t you?” He felt like it was rather pitiful to be protected by a girl, but he was honestly happy about it.

As she thought about it, Nephy’s ears bounced and quivered.

“I’ll do it. Master, for your sake, I will learn sorcery.”

I’d rather you say it’s for your own sake, though... Even so, having reached the point where she held some sort of ambition was a step forward. That was why Zagan replied in a cheery tone.

“Then Nephy, you are my disciple from this moment on.”

“Yes.” Her expression already looked happier.

A disciple, huh...? Until he said it, he’d never thought of the idea. The idea of passing his knowledge and power to another that is.

Still, he wanted to impart Nephy with all that knowledge unconditionally.

The two of them remained like that for a while, basking in the silence.

After a long period of time, Nephy suddenly spoke in a comforting tone.

“Um, Master.”

“What is it?”

“About this evening...” By evening, she likely meant after they’d finished driving back the Angelic Knights, when Nephy was treating Zagan’s wound.

“Master, you were told — you, who can do anything on your own, can’t understand the feelings of the weak.”

“Yeah, I said something like that, didn’t I?” That was one of the things he told Nephy after she spoke openly about her secret.

It was a dull story from the past, but he wanted to let Nephy know that there was no need to worry about the eyes and words of others.

And in response, Nephy gently brushed Zagan’s head lovingly.

“Master, you spoke of it as if it were nothing, but in truth it was painful, right?”

Zagan opened his eyes wide as he took in those words.

“Why... do you feel that way?”

Nephy’s snow-white hair swayed as she shook her head.

“I don’t know, but...” As if it were her own pain, she clutched her chest.

“At that time, you looked awfully sad.” Nephy then curled around Zagan’s body as if embracing him. Tender bulges leaned in on his face, which made Zagan unintentionally blush.

“H-Hey...” Without worrying at all about Zagan’s unrest, Nephy kept speaking.

“Master, you aren’t evil. Even if the words you speak are few in number, I will never forget... that you have been kind to me.”

Even if it was pathetic, Zagan felt liable to burst into tears as he heard those words. His voice trembled, and he only managed a short, simple reply.

“...I see.”

However, despite that, Nephy’s ears shook happily as she nodded.

“I’m glad.” Nephy’s heartbeat was being passed to him through her chest, which was pressing down on him. Whether due to nerves, bashfulness, or perhaps another emotion, it was a very rapid sound.

It was a feeling of his frozen emotions softly melting, which made Zagan lose all strength in his shoulders.

“Nephy.”

“Yes.” He just wanted to call out to her, even though he had nothing to say. He just... wanted to try saying her name.

“This kind of thing... isn’t bad... is it?”

“...It isn’t.” Nephy simply nodded as she always did.

Surely, even if he sought her body, she wouldn’t refuse. Yet, being atop her lap was far too comfortable to allow for such thoughts.

Zagan fell asleep before he knew it. It had been long since he felt so at ease.



“What the hell, man! I came here after hearing you were attacked by Angelic Knights, but you don’t have a scratch on you!”

The next day, in the throne room.

The one who said that after breaking through someone else’s barrier and trespassing was Barbatos.

It had been about one week since they last met face to face, but the way he acted hadn’t changed.

Zagan waved his hand as if he found it irritating. Frankly speaking, he never showed up when he was truly needed, and he was just a hindrance coming in so late, so he really was irritated.

“Like I care. It’s their fault for being weak, right?”

“Weak? Come on, I heard that someone with a Sacred Sword was sent over!”

“Sacred Sword? Oh, now that you mention it, there was one.”

He was talking about Chastille. Honestly, the memory of her had faded from his mind due to Nephy’s use of mysticism. Moreover, though she was an Angelic Knight, she didn’t point her hostility toward him. If she actually got serious, then she would have likely been able to fight on Zagan’s level. That was why he didn’t have much awareness of her as an enemy.

“Wow, even the Maiden of the Sacred Sword wasn’t a worthy opponent?”

“No, she was quite strong, actually. She broke a few of the castle’s barriers, after all.” And, as he’d not yet finished repairing said barriers, he felt that he’d rather go finish the job than continue their conversation.

However, as he was thinking that, Nephy came over with tea and baked sweets on a tray.

After lining up the tray on top of a small table that she had prepared ahead of time without Zagan’s knowledge, she bobbed down at the waist courteously.

“By all means. Please use the milk and sugar to your liking with the tea.” Barbatos’ mouth popped open as he watched all that.

“H-Hey, that’s... the elf from before, right? Am I wrong?”

“No, there’s no mistaking she’s the girl from the auction.”

“You still haven’t used her as a sacrifice? Or what, in exchange for prolonging her life, you’re making her serve you or something? How nice. You’ve got good taste there.”

Nephy clung to Zagan’s mantle as if she was frightened by Barbatos’ thoughts.

“Don’t lump me together with you. Nephy is, well... Um, my disciple.”

Barbatos’ face spasmed, and then he screamed, clearly unable to believe Zagan’s words.

“The hell? A disciple? You just said disciple? You said disciple, right? That thing where you teach someone else your sorcery, right? You?”

“Can’t I?” Zagan pushed his undesired friend back like he found him detestable.

However, it was difficult to say that he bought her because he fell in love at first sight. After worrying about it for a bit, he hit on a good excuse that seemed to fit the bill.

“There’s sorcery that I can’t use alone. Nephy will definitely be useful.” He was speaking of Nephy as if she were a tool again, but he was making his best effort to praise her.

Even with sorcery, I can’t obtain everything on my own. After all, the simple happiness he’d gained from being together with Nephy was one such thing.

It seemed Nephy had gotten used to Zagan’s roundabout way of speaking too. And so, she gracefully spread out the hem of her skirt as she bowed her head.

“I am honored.” And, as if taken aback, Barbatos smacked his own forehead.

“Shit, I get it... Nothing’s out of reach if you’ve got an elf by your side... Shit, I never thought of using one like that...”

Zagan was aware that his face turned grim as he heard Barbatos speak of Nephy as a tool. Sure, he’d said something similar himself, but that didn’t mean anyone else could.

After a while of thinking, Barbatos had a look of surprise on his face, as if he’d stumbled across a curious thought.

“Can’t be... Don’t tell me you crushed those damn Angelic Knights thanks to that power?”

“Well, Nephy certainly did play a part.” One of the Angelic Knights was defeated by Nephy, so it wasn’t wrong to say he borrowed her power.

Then, with a meek expression on his face, Barbatos muttered.

“So, that destruction at the entrance is also because of her power?”

Looking back, Zagan realized he never cleaned up the aftermath of Nephy manipulating the forest. From the looks of it, Barbatos had likely seen the traces already. And, the sight probably tipped off the fact that something other than sorcery was at play.

Taking Zagan’s expression as confirmation, Barbatos let out a groan.

“You’re... seriously aiming for the Archdemon title, huh?”

Upon hearing that name, Zagan finally remembered that he and Barbatos were candidates to succeed Archdemon Marchosias. Honestly, his head had been full because of Nephy, so he hadn’t spared the idea a thought over the last few days.

The reason for that was because Zagan finally had something he desired far more than status.

I don’t mind not being crowned Archdemon, as long as I can hold on to what I truly want...

It wasn’t like having his mind fully occupied by Nephy made him lose all interest in the title. On the contrary, Zagan was most likely the one who most suited the position.

Still, he didn’t wish for the title, but something that came along with it... Yes...

Will becoming an Archdemon keep other sorcerers away from Nephy? Nephy had become Zagan’s disciple. If he were an Archdemon, then she would be the disciple of one. Plus, she would become an existence similar to him.

No matter how confident the sorcerer, there likely weren’t any idiots out there who would pick a fight with him in that case. That was why Zagan replied with a ferocious laugh.

“Is there a reason for me not to?” In all honesty, at the current stage, he didn’t really think he would be selected.

It wasn’t that he doubted his skills, but he knew it’d be difficult to charge past sorcerers who had lived for several hundred years when he was only eighteen.

Zagan only began walking down the path of a sorcerer ten years ago, and the other sorcerers had spent several hundred years honing their skills. No matter how he struggled against the knowledge they gained over time and their accumulated experience, he had no chance of winning.

Still, as long as I continue to draw breath, I’ll aim to become the next Archdemon after that.

A new Archdemon wasn’t crowned all too often, but he figured he’d have a

shot as long as he lived another hundred years.

Zagan took a teacup into his hand. After savoring the refreshing aroma from it, he put the cup against his lips. He didn't know what brand it was, but it had an elegant flavor. It perfectly matched the baked sweets, as well.

"Mm... It has a good taste."

"That brings me the greatest joy, Master."

Barbatos stared at that exchange like it was unexpected.

"Zagan, tell me I'm wrong here, buddy. You're not starting to care for this girl, are you?"

"Is it that strange to cherish one's disciple?" As he said that, Zagan came to realize the word disciple was quite convenient. His love at first sight, which he'd been trying to figure out how to explain, was glossed over thanks to a single word.

Barbatos then raised his voice with a chuckle.

"Heh... I see. That's how it is, huh? Even you've got some fucking humanity left in you. Weird."

"Shut up."

After gulping down the tea in one go, Barbatos left his seat.

"What, leaving already?"

"Yeah. I mean, there's no way I'm letting you steal the Archdemon title from me. Besides, an unexpected prize popped up." Barbatos walked away, leaving behind Zagan, who was tilting his head to the side.

"The hell'd that guy come here for...?" As Zagan let out an astonished sigh, Nephy spoke in a curious voice.

"Is he not a friend?"

"Not a chance in hell. Friends only bring disadvantages, so you have to choose them well."

"But Master, you seemed to be having fun."

“Is that so?”

“Indeed.” He didn’t want to admit it, but Nephy nodded in a convinced manner.

Talking with a guy like that... is fun? He thought the idea stupid. Nephy was surely misunderstanding. However, for some reason, he was unable to fully deny her words. By some chance, it could be that Zagan simply didn’t realize that he’d already been blessed with a friend.

Washing away the inability to accept that fact with a spot of tea, Zagan got off his throne.

“Now then, it’s about time I start repairing the barrier those damn Angelic Knights broke. Nephy, you should come assist me. Think of it as a lesson. I’ll be starting from the foundations of the magic circle.”

“Yes, Master,” she replied.

Time that was not spent alone, contrary to expectation, had quite the sweet taste.



It had been half a month since the fateful day Zagan bought Nephy.

During that time, she had been diligently studying the foundations of sorcery. If not for the collar, she would have already reached the point where she could wield it reasonably well.

As for mysticism, well, it seemed controlling it was still difficult. It also appeared that it was definitely not an omnipotent power, as it had many limitations. Zagan was left with the impression that the road to improving in that particular skill was still rather long.

Even so, he thought that their life together was fulfilling. And during that time, Zagan received a summons from the Archdemons. *Now then, what exactly do they want?*

When he went to meet them, he faced twelve shadowy figures. Each and every one of them had their face concealed, and they were positioned in a way that allowed them to remain in the shadows, so Zagan was unable to make out

any of their features.

However, there was likely no meaning to such concealment. The mana that he felt rolling off them was on a different order of magnitude, which made their identities obvious.

What the hell...

Sweat suddenly formed on his brow. Yes, even though they were merely looking at him, they were giving off an intimidating aura that sent shivers right down to the marrow of his bones. It felt like the air itself had turned to mud due to the malice that clung to him. Simply standing there made him sick to his stomach.

Were they truly mortal creatures, just like him? This was not the unease a frog would feel from being glared at by a snake. It felt more like being a frog who was already in a snake's stomach.

The twelve existing Archdemons... had gathered here in this place.

They were what awaited sorcerers at the end of their long journey. One would either enter their fold, or rot away before arriving. Those were the only two fates that awaited all sorcerers. And eventually, one among them solemnly opened their mouth.

"So thou art, Zagan." Following that, a woman's voice rang out.

"I heard whispers that he was young, but a child, really..." And yet another voice continued afterward.

"How amusing. That would make him the youngest in history, would it not?" The Archdemons gazed at Zagan, then began laughing in a somewhat strange manner.

Zagan didn't like being made a fool of. Sure, they were all figures who deserved his respect, but Zagan didn't have the spare time to entertain a bunch of elderly individuals.

If I don't return quickly, I won't make it in time for Nephy's breakfast. Nephy was waiting for him on her own, all alone, as he stood around with people he couldn't care less about.

Plus, though the castle's barrier had been restored, it wasn't strong enough to stop an Angelic Knight with a Sacred Sword, or any sorcery on Barbatos' level. As long as Nephy's mysticism was still unstable, he had to keep his trips away from the castle short.

That was why Zagan impudently spoke out.

"What, did you summon me just to observe a peculiar animal? If you're satisfied, I'd like to head back now." He'd made a reckless remark toward people of far higher standing, so he couldn't even complain if he was killed. However, the Archdemons simply muttered, seemingly pleased by his attitude.

"My, how impolite of us."

"Even to us, a sorcerer like thee is a first. Do forgive our throbbing inquisitiveness."

"I must say, you are rather bold. To speak to us so sharply in this place." After several of the laughing voices spoke up, one shadowy figure among them, who appeared to be the leader, took charge.

"I shall get right to the point." The cunning tone of that voice made it feel as if Zagan's heart was caught in a vise.

Enduring the cold sweat, he stared at the shadowy figure directly in front of him. And then, it made a shocking announcement.

"Sorcerer Zagan. Thou shalt become our thirteenth sworn friend — we have judged thee worthy to bear the title Archdemon."

In response to that sudden announcement, Zagan stiffened up in place.

Did I hear that wrong? They're making me... an Archdemon? Rather than joy, feelings of doubt welled up within him.

Before Zagan could open his mouth, an enormous sigil made of light rose up behind the Archdemons.

No, it wasn't light. It was mana. It was woven together from an unnatural amount and density of mana. Simply witnessing it made Zagan's knees buckle. It was a mass of overwhelming power. And then, he felt the same power as that crest coming from all twelve people present.

The leading shadowy figure then spoke.

“This is the Sigil of the Archdemon that was entrusted to Marchosias. Every new Archdemon must inherit it to join us.”

A gulp rang out from Zagan’s throat. *So Archdemon isn’t just some fancy title, huh?* Inheriting a sigil — if that meant inheriting that power, then there was no way a normal sorcerer could ever rival an Archdemon. It seemed the reason all sorcerers had no choice but to abide by an Archdemon’s decrees wasn’t only because of hierarchy.

After taking in such a sight, Zagan realized that this was no joke, and that he really was about to become an Archdemon.

Before he knew it, the depths of his throat felt parched. And while his throat throbbed, Zagan asked for clarification.

“I will... become an Archdemon?”

“Art thou discontent?”

“Not quite, but it is baffling. It’s not like there aren’t far more powerful sorcerers than me out there, right?” Barbatos, for example. Even the sorcerers he spotted at the auction where he bought Nephy had lived longer than Zagan, and they were all ones who had accumulated vast knowledge and power. In contrast, Zagan didn’t even possess a second name.

“A natural suspicion, Zagan. Thine power is still but a pygmy.”

“To the point where you would vanish were we to blow our breath.”
However, the shadowy figures continued speaking.

“Even so, there are no sorcerers who canst kill thee.” Deep in his mind, Zagan clicked his tongue.

So they’ve even seen through my trump card, then? Zagan’s power was just as they described.

“The first sorcerer that thou didst murder was Andras, who held the name ‘Resentment,’ was it not?” That was the name of the sorcerer who planned to use Zagan as a sacrifice.

“He did not possess as much power as thou dost now, but neither was he a

weak sorcerer.”

“Even if it was a one in ten thousand chance, he wasn’t so incompetent that he would fall behind a child who was eight.”

“And yet, thou didst kill him instead, and stole all his wisdom.” A record of treason. And yet, the Archdemons extolled it as if it were a great exploit.

“Up until then, thou didst not even have a single opportunity to touch upon sorcery.”

“The only time that thou didst witness sorcery... was that single time Andras had fired it at thee.”

“And in that state, thou didst butcher a sorcerer who possessed a name, correct?” And, as if speaking with love, one of the shadowy figures raised their voice.

“Thou didst... learn sorcery from seeing it but once.” And another shadowy figure followed after them.

“No, from that single time alone, thou didst understand even the structure of sorcery.”

“That is why, from that one experience, didst thou create a unique sorcery.”

Zagan only possessed a single sorcery that belonged solely to him. It was not something he stole from Andras, and it was not something he learned from sorcery of the past.

It was something nobody else could use, sorcery that belonged only to him. That itself was the first sorcery he learned, and it was the very power that brought down Andras.

“Sorcery to be awed. And also—”

“An abominable talent.” The twelve shadowy figures whispered as if praising him.

“That is to say, that once thou hast decided to steal, none can stop thee.”

“That is to say, that once thou hast decided to kill, none can survive.”

“If thou didst desire power, all sorcerers could not help but offer all they have

to thee.”

“If thou didst command them once, all sorcerers would have no choice but to obey thine will unconditionally.”

“Truly befitting of the name Archdemon... The power of a tyrant, indeed.” While they were throwing out various words of adoration toward him, Zagan could feel a conviction in their voices as if they were saying ‘though not a match for us’ with each phrase.

And then, as if thrusting that fact before him, they continued speaking.

“Though it may be a contradiction, as thou art now, thou art still a pygmy.”

“However, thou dost possess a talent so powerful it appears repulsive.”

“Talent is possibility.”

“One day, thou shalt become the strongest sorcerer in history.”

“That’s why we dare to make thine pygmy self an Archdemon.”

“All is for the sake of reaching new heights of wisdom.”

“All is for the sake of carrying sorcery to its extremes.” The chorus of the Archdemons that sounded like singing stopped there. And Zagan felt he was getting swallowed into the atmosphere of those shadowy figures.

Eventually, as if shaking all that off, Zagan glared back at them.

“If everything’s as you say, wouldn’t that mean I could steal from all of you right here and now?” Of course, Zagan wasn’t foolish enough to challenge the people here to a fight. But still, he asked as if to confirm if they were just such existences.

And, as if waiting for that question, the Archdemons laughed.

“Indeed. However, do keep in mind.”

“Thou may hast far more to lose than gain from stealing from us, dost thou not?”

Zagan’s stomach writhed. *If they’ve learned so much about me already, then they obviously know about Nephy, huh?*

Stealing from them would mean opposing twelve beings of unimaginable power. Even if he somehow outdid them, he knew it wouldn't end with them simply taking a hostage. And, the truth of the matter was that the result would not have changed in any meaningful way had he not met Nephy.

All who resisted them would be brought to ruin. Sure, even an Archdemon may not have been able to kill Zagan, but that just meant he'd survive. Zagan had no way of actually defeating one. Each time he gained something, it would be snatched away and broken.

In the end, all that awaited was ruin. And there, Zagan realized what he'd done for the very first time. *Did I... get Nephy involved in such a dangerous situation?*

And then, the leading shadowy figure spoke once more.

"We would hear thine answer."

"...Before that, there is one thing that I desire. It depends on whether I obtain it."

"Haha, thine avarice runs deep, I see. Try speaking of it, then."

Zagan put his desire into words, and the shadowy figures nodded as if they found it strange.

"Very well. Thou canst do as thou wills with Marchosias' legacy."

"You gave in... awfully quickly there."

"Did we not say it before? If thou hast decided to steal, none could obstruct thee." What he wanted to obtain had so easily entered his grasp. It was rather anticlimactic, but Zagan nodded all the same.

"Then I will gratefully accept the vacant Archdemon position."

The leading shadow figure spoke once he finished.

"We welcome our new sworn friend." Unexpectedly, what welcomed Zagan was applause.

They didn't converse like humans in an assembly, so this ordinary reaction was contrary to his expectations. And conversely, that made it feel all the more

eerie. It was as if inhuman monsters were imitating humans.

Before Zagan knew it, his clenched fist was wet with sweat. Still, as he was somewhat released from that overbearing pressure, Zagan regained enough composure to ask a question that was completely unrelated to the situation at hand.

“There’s one thing... I’d like to ask all of you. Do you know of a man who uses sorcery by peeling off fresh skin?”

One among the shadowy figures immediately spoke up.

“That would likely be ‘Face Peeler,’ yes. A worthless sorcerer. I have heard that thou didst already end that man’s life, though?” It seemed that it was definitely that sorcerer.

“Was he a sorcerer of sufficient skill? Enough to break through the barrier of another sorcerer’s domain, I mean.”

“That would likely be impossible for him. He was an excellent spy, but when it came to barriers he was only at the level of mere child’s play.” Hearing that answer, Zagan fell into a somewhat gloomy mood.

In other words, that guy had an accomplice. And the pool of suspects was limited to those capable of breaking through Zagan’s barrier. As such, he already knew of the true identity of said accomplice. Figuring that out made him realize once again that sorcerers had no hope of salvation.

The shadowy figure before him then tilted its head to the side.

“He should not be a man that thou needst worry about to such an extent...”

“Yes, it’s exactly as you say. I’ve asked of a trivial matter. Please forget about it.” And after that, another shadowy figure nodded in realization.

“We have had a lapse of memory, I see.”

“About what?”

“That thou dost not possess a second name. It is most inconvenient.”

“Yeah. Now that you mention it, I don’t.” Giving the name Archdemon to such an individual was likely unprecedented.

“However, something like thine name has already been settled, correct?”

“So it has. It seems Marchosias had already decided on it.”

Thus, Zagan unexpectedly became an Archdemon.



“Welcome home, Master.” Nephy came out to meet Zagan as he returned to the castle. As always, the changes in her expression were meager, but her ears were quivering with a twitch. It made Zagan think she was anxiously awaiting his return.

“Preparations for dinner have been completed. I have made lamb stew this evening.”

“Y-Yeah, thanks...” A sense of guilt began welling up within Zagan as Nephy treated him so kindly.

Nephy has yet... to be sullied.

Even in the incident back at the elf village, Nephy simply did nothing, so she hadn’t actually killed anyone. And when they were attacked by the Angelic Knights, Zagan had stopped her before it was too late.

However, Zagan was different. In fact, he was made painfully aware of just how different he was mere moments ago.

The mysterious Archdemons. Every sorcerer sought their power and prestige. A position among them was the end goal of each and every individual who studied sorcery. And Zagan was now among their ranks. He had already become one of them.

By sticking around Zagan, Nephy would be drawn into their world. She would dive deep into that muddy darkness, where not even a single speck of light would shine.

Right now, it’s still possible for her to turn back. It was already too late for Zagan, but Nephy still had a future within the light.

“Master? Did something happen?”

As Zagan cast his eyes downward, Nephy looked up at him, her gaze full of

concern. Her ears, which had been pointed out perfectly seconds ago, were now despondently drooping down. It was clear she was sympathizing with Zagan.

Was it really okay to drag such a pure girl into the darkness?

Nephy's neck had a boorish collar wrapped around it. It was the symbol that marked her as Zagan's property.

If it weren't for that thing, Nephy could be free.

If that collar didn't exist, then surely everyone would accept her without prejudice. In fact, Kianoides would likely have been a good place for her to reside. After all, the people of that town warmly received a sorcerer like Zagan. And if something were to happen, Zagan was close enough to protect her.

At first, Nephy was sure to be bewildered, but if she was warmly received, then she would gradually open her heart. She had managed to relax her guard a lot around someone like Zagan, so it would be even quicker with ordinary villagers.

After thinking his plan through, Zagan removed a key from a pouch.

"Nephy, I ended up becoming an Archdemon."

"An Arch...demon?"

"A king among sorcerers. The height of power, which all other sorcerers must obey."

After staring in wonder for a while at the sudden news, she clasped her hands and nodded.

"Congratulations, Master." Her expression was the same as always, but he could still feel that she was congratulating him from the bottom of her heart.

And, precisely because of that, the pain in his heart only grew worse. However, he wasn't done yet. Zagan continued speaking, even though the weight of his words seemed to be crushing his very soul.

"I obtained the legacy of my predecessor, Marchosias, when I took his place. Nephy, that's the sorcerer who captured you." And so, the key in Zagan's hand was also part of Marchosias' legacy. It was what Zagan demanded from the

twelve Archdemons.

“Nephy, don’t move,” Zagan said, as he inserted the key into her collar. And, with a light click, the iron collar crumbled to pieces.

“Huh?” Nephy stared at the wreckage of the collar that had fallen to the ground, sporting a dumbfounded expression on her face all the while.

“M-Master, this is...” As Nephy began tearing up, Zagan nodded.

“Yeah. As an Archdemon, I no longer need you, Nephy. Get out.” Zagan coldly declared that to a girl he found more lovely than any other.

And so, the long cohabitation between two awkward individuals abruptly ended.

Chapter V: An Archdemon's Actions Are Expected to be Audacious

Before she knew it, Nephy was in a corner of town, crouching down in front of a deserted house.

Why... am I in a place like this...? It was like a fog had rolled over her mind, and she was unable to think properly.

The scenery looked familiar. It was likely Kianoides, the first town that she went out to visit with Zagan, and also a place that she visited every now and then to shop for ingredients and whatnot.

She had absolutely no recollection of how she came to be there, however.

In the first place, what reason did she have to travel so far? She remembered up to the point of preparing dinner, but did Zagan eat it? It was the first meal Nephy had ever made, the stew that her unsociable master would stare at in wonder and delight.

She wanted to see that joyous expression of his once more. And so, she had to quickly return to his service.

However, as that thought came to mind, she realized what she was grasping. A fragment of a collar that had crumbled to pieces. And, to her surprise, there was no longer a collar around her neck.

Ah, that's right. I was...

"Thrown away... by Master." As she put her thoughts into words, her mind shattered to pieces and became a jumble.

She felt her heart coming to a standstill. And if it hadn't, then perhaps Nephy had simply lost her mind.

Even though he said... he would allow me to remain by his side...

It was a first for her.

The first time Nephy had been treated as a person, and was spoken to as such. He'd even prepared a room and clothes for her, and had given her a reason to live.

The only one who ever told her that she was needed... was Zagan. He said it was fine for Nephy to be there, so she thought that she'd found a place where she truly belonged.

And yet...

Nephy buried her face in her knees and curled up into a ball.

"Do tears... not flow at times like this...?" The whole situation didn't seem real to her. And perhaps because of that, she was not drowning in sorrow.

She thought that if she just closed her eyes and fell asleep, then by the time she woke up, she would be back at the castle.

And yet, in a corner of her mind, she understood that there was no way that would ever happen, that this was reality, and she had to face it head on.

Despite that, none of her emotions were working properly. And at that exact moment...

"You're... the one from back then...? Sorcerer Zagan's servant, yes?" It was a voice that she didn't recall hearing before.

As she looked up, a girl wearing the Anointed Armor of an Angelic Knight was standing before her. And she was carrying a greatsword on her back.

Even though Nephy didn't recognize her voice, it felt like she recognized her appearance, so she observed her for a while longer. Before long, she remembered where she had seen her before.

"The one who fought against Master...?" It was one of the Angelic Knights from the fight in the forest.

And now that she thought of it, this girl was the only one who retreated without any significant injuries.

"You hear me, Nephy? Stay away from those damn Angelic Knights." Zagan had given her that warning at some point.

He'd told her how they were the natural enemies of sorcerers, and how they were professional killers who even executed all those related to sorcerers, condemning them as sinners. And also, about how there was a danger that they would set their sights on Nephy, so she should be wary of them.

Unfortunately, Zagan, who had told her all that, was no longer by her side. Why exactly did it end up like this? She had no idea at all.

"You're... going to kill me, right?" Nephy muttered as if she had given up on everything.

It was likely that this girl had also witnessed her mysticism. She didn't think that those who arbitrarily decided that even a sorcerer with a kind heart like Zagan's was evil would let Nephy live.

Plus, she didn't have her collar anymore, either. With the sorcery that Zagan had taught her and her mysticism, she may have been able to fight against the girl before her eyes, but she couldn't even find a reason to do so.

If Master isn't here, then there's no point in living. She thought it would be fine to just die there.

Oddly enough, the girl in front of her shook her head with a panicked look.

"W-Wait! Don't misunderstand. I don't intend to bring any harm to you."

"Hm...? Angelic Knights are people who kill sorcerers, right? I am... Master's servant, and Master's disciple. By all means, please behead me."

"S-Stop speaking of me like I'm some sort of cutthroat!"

"Am I wrong?"

"Completely!" For some reason, it was the Angelic Knight who was on the verge of tears.

And perhaps because such a dispute broke out, before they knew it, a crowd had gathered around them.

(Hey, what's with the uproar here? Isn't the one over there Nephy?) (It's an Angelic Knight... Don't they have their eyes set on Nephy 'cause she's a servant at that sorcerer's place?) (Shouldn't somebody save her, then? Even at the best of times, it seems like Nephy has a weak disposition.) The onlookers were each

saying whatever they wanted, but for some reason all the criticism was focused on the Angelic Knight.

“I-I’m telling you that’s not true, okay?” And she shrank away as if frightened by their words.

And then, as if unable to watch anymore, a person jumped out from the crowd of people.

“Hup! Nephy, you alright?” The one who leaped out as if to cover Nephy was a young avian girl that Nephy clearly remembered.

“Manuela...” It was the clerk who picked out stuff for Nephy at the clothing store.

Even after that, they would sometimes meet in town and she would recommend new clothes to Nephy. The night gown that she wore in the castle was also something that Manuela hand-picked.

Looking at Nephy’s face, Manuela was left speechless.

“Wh-What’s wrong? What did she do to you? Are you hurt? Where’s your master?” Somehow, it seemed that Nephy was making a considerably miserable face. Manuela broke into a panic as if she had just found a wounded person covered in blood.

“It’s... nothing. I’m not... hurt.”

“There’s no way it’s nothing, right!?” As her voice grew harsh, the avian girl aimed a scowl at the Angelic Knight.

“Hey, you! Don’t you feel embarrassed doing this just ‘cause you’re from the church? Bullying such a frail, kind-hearted girl is disgusting!”

“Exactly! That’s right!” “Get lost, Angelic Knight!” “And make your donations cheaper, too!” A storm of criticism broke out from the crowd.

“Y-You’re wrong...”

“What’s wrong, exactly!?” “You made Nephy make such a sad face, how dare you lie so calmly!” “That’s just inhuman!” The angry roars had reached a fever pitch, and the Angelic Knight had become remarkably pale and sank to the floor.

The uproar was getting larger and larger all on its own, but it wasn't like the Angelic Knight had done anything to Nephy. And so, she raised her voice to mediate.

"Um, please wait... everyone."

"It's fine, Nephy. We'll definitely protect you!" As Manuela turned back to her with a determined smile on her face, Nephy responded while maintaining her corpse-like gaze.

"...No, that person... hasn't done anything to me." Suddenly, the crowd fell into silence.

"Eh, but..."

"Even though I've been telling you that you're wrong..." The young Angelic Knight had already burst into tears. It was just a miserable sight, seeing her covered in tears and mucus.

"Hic... I just ... hic, got worried when, ack, worry... I saw that she looked hurt..." It seemed that she really did only call out to Nephy because she looked miserable.

Thinking that she was cornered by the citizens because of her, Nephy somehow felt apologetic.

"Uh...." Manuela made a frankly troubled face.

"Then, why is Nephy making such a sad face? It doesn't look like a trivial matter..."

"That's..."

"Waaaaaah!" At a loss at for how to reply, the Angelic Knight burst out into more tears without taking her disgraceful behavior into consideration.

Nephy then stood up, and lowered her head with a bob.

"I apologize... for causing confusion... And to the Angelic Knight as well, I'm sorry. Well then, I'll take my leave now." And as she tried to leave, Manuela stopped her in a panic.

"W-Wait... Wait a sec. There's no way I can just leave you alone after seeing

you like that, right?”

“But...” As she muttered that word, Nephy was looking at the Angelic Knight who was continuing to wail excessively before her. Speaking of people who couldn’t be left alone, Nephy believed that it also applied to that girl.

Manuela was also at a loss of words, and eventually let out a ‘Aaah, geez’ and pulled at the girl’s red hair.

“Both of you, come with me!” Just like that, the odd combination of the disciple of a sorcerer, an Angelic Knight, and a clerk of a clothing store, left together in a hurry.



“...Sorry for showing you such unsightly behavior.” The Angelic Knight, who had finally stopped crying, said that while her nose was still red. Looking at her once more, the young woman appeared to be around the same age as Nephy.

The three of them entered a bar together, but unfortunately the atmosphere around them was rather awkward. Even though it wasn’t all that spacious a shop, the customers around them all moved to seats closer to the walls.

If possible, Nephy also felt she would have preferred to join them and become an ornament on the wall, but she was one of the reasons the air had soured.

Setting aside the Angelic Knight who wounded Zagan, Manuela had gotten involved in it by covering for Nephy. Nephy hadn’t lost all feeling to the point where she could just run away and abandon her.

Although, she had no idea just what sort of face she should be making, given the situation.

That was why the only thing Nephy could do was remain expressionless and silent.

Manuela then put her best effort into speaking with a cheerful voice.

“There are a lot of friendly faces here, so you can relax. The second floor is also an inn, so...” Judging from the state that Nephy was in and the fact that Zagan was nowhere to be found, she concluded that Nephy wasn’t going to

head back home.



After being brought over to the bar like a paying customer, Nephy shook her head.

“I don’t have... any money right now.” It really did seem like she went out with little more than the clothes on her back. All that was in her pocket was a memo for the recipe for dinner, nothing less, nothing more.

Looking at that scrap of paper, Manuela’s expression clouded over.

“Ah, geez, tonight will be my treat, so just sit down! You haven’t had dinner yet, right?” Nephy had no intention of replying, but the Angelic Knight next to her let out a grumble from her stomach, which made Manuela look over at her coldly.

“...”

“W-Well sorry about that!”

As a disciple of a sorcerer, Nephy, and this girl who was an Angelic Knight were sworn enemies... Or, they were supposed to be, anyway. However, for whatever reason, Nephy could not sense any sort of enmity from the unreliable girl.

After Manuela sat Nephy down, she began ordering one thing after the other... Most of it seemed to be alcohol, though.

As they awaited their food, the Angelic Knight opened her mouth to speak.

“Now that I think of it, I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I? Name’s Chastille. I’m sure you can tell, but I serve as an Angelic Knight.”

“...Manuela. You pay for your own portion, got it?”

“Why the hell are you so cold toward me!?”

“Cause I still don’t know if you were really bullying Nephy or not?” Chastille stiffened up with a twitch, perhaps because she had, in fact, attacked Nephy’s home.

“Er... That’s...”

“See!? Like I thought, you really did something.”

“B-But that was my mission, so...”

“What? You saying it’s okay to hurt her if it’s your mission?”

It seemed Angelic Knights didn’t have a good reputation amongst the townspeople. That only made sense, as Kianoides was considered the domain of a sorcerer, which probably affected the residents’ opinions.

And in response to Chastille, who seemed liable to cry again, Nephy spoke up.

“No, it’s quite alright. Even back then, you didn’t harm me in any way.”

“Really?”

“Someone else injured Master, and that person already properly compensated us for it.” Perhaps having recalled Nephy’s mysticism, Chastille’s body trembled with a start.

“Sooo, what did this one do?”

“I don’t really know. But she helped make our request for them to retreat a reality.”

“Oh, so like, she carried the luggage?”

“Yes.”

“You’re wrong!” Chastille yelled out as she slammed her hands on the table with a bang.

“I’m the Maiden of the Sacred Sword, you know? In other words, I’m among the twelve Archangels! And yet, what’s with that phrasing!?”

“Well, is there something actually wrong with the way I described it?”

“That’s... Err...” Chastille mumbled as if trying to refute it.

Is she just timid...?

And while they were talking of such things, before long, plenty of soup was placed in front of Nephy.

“Um, I can’t possibly accept this.”

“What, you’re planning on just sitting there without eating anything? If you do that, I won’t be able to get drunk at all. You’d just kill my buzz!”

“Haaa...” It was a somewhat unintelligible reason, but overpowered by

Manuela's vigor, Nephy simply returned a nod.

Why... is this person being so nice to me...? As she took a spoon into her hand, she set aside the fragment of her collar that she had been carefully carrying around all this time on the table.

"Did your collar break?"

"No, Master... took it off for me."

Chastille then stared fixedly at Nephy's face.

"Despite that, you don't look all that hap— Ow."

"...Hey, read the air a bit here." It seemed that Manuela kicked Chastille's leg under the table. Her leg should have been protected by Anointed Armor, but the attack slipped through the gaps present in the design. The blow made tears form in Chastille's eyes.

Troubled by how to reply, Nephy gripped her spoon tighter.

"...Thank you for the meal."

"Mm." After bringing the soup over to her lips, a somehow nostalgic taste came to her.

No, it wasn't nostalgic or anything. It was the same taste as the soup she made just that evening.

It was lamb stew.

With a drip, a hot sensation trailed down her cheek.

"Huh...?" Tears ran down her cheeks. Even though she wasn't supposed to feel sorrow, once she got a taste of the hot soup, tears began overflowing with no signs of stopping.

Chastille then raised her voice in a complete fluster.

"A-Are you alright? Did... I say something bad again?"

"Waaah, waaaaaaaah!" Unable to endure it, Nephy broke into a crying fit.

Why, why, Master...

In response to Nephy having broken down into tears, Manuela spread out her

large wings and embraced her as if to share her pain.

“Geez... Both of you can cry all you want and cling to your big sis here.”

“I-I’m not crying, though.” The world may have been far kinder than Nephy thought it was.

After crying for a while, Nephy began speaking of what happened at the castle little by little. Manuela listened to her silently while holding a tankard of ale in one hand. Though by the time she finished listening, there were already five empty tankards lined up on the table.

Chastille was also listening to her with bated breath. Even though she was an Angelic Knight, she may not have been a bad person.

As Nephy finished, Manuela violently slammed the tankard she had up against her flushed face onto the table.

“So, you were driven out without reason?”

Nephy returned a slight nod in response.

“Did I... make some kind of mistake?” It was far too sudden, and she couldn’t tell what was what.

Chastille, however, nodded in an indignant manner.

“And here I thought he was a promising man... How could he do something so cruel? It’s almost like he was just using you!”

“Master isn’t like that,” Nephy replied without a moment’s delay. That made Chastille falter.

“I-I at least know that much, but that’s exactly why I don’t get why he drove you...”

“What do you know about him?”

“Eek, you don’t have to get so angry...”

“I’m not angry.” After crying herself dry, it seemed that Nephy had become even more expressionless than usual, which confused Chastille greatly.

Manuela then cut in between them and pacified the situation.

“Now now, of course she’d get angry if you slander her dear master like that.”

“It’s not like I was slandering him!”

Manuela looked back at Nephy, who was watching them argue.

“So, what do you plan to do from now on, Nephy?”

“What... should I do...?” Because there was nothing she could do, she was completely at a loss for ideas.

Chastille then cleared out her throat with a cough.

“How about entering the protection of we Angelic Knights? Protecting citizens who have been harmed by sorcerers is one of our duties.”

“What? Oh, come on. If she goes with you, she’ll be put on trial by the faith! Like I thought, you really are just bullying Nephy!”

“You’re wrong! I mean, she’s just a servant, so if we treat her as a victim, then even the church should be obligated to protect her...”

“If there’s a trial, then they’ll figure out that isn’t true right away. There’s no way we can hand Nephy over to a place where she’ll be in danger.”

“Then what should we do...?”

Nephy shook her head in response to Chastille, who was wearing a sullen expression.

“I’m grateful for your consideration, but that would make Master out to be a villain. I cannot... do that.”

Chastille’s shoulders drooped down as she heard that. And then, she opened her mouth as if it were difficult for her to say it.

“There’s something that I’d like to ask you. Do you think Zagan commands several sorcerers? Is he the type of man who’d kidnap innocents to fuel sacrificial rituals?”

“I do not think so.” It was likely some sort of prejudice against sorcerers, but Nephy was able to reply immediately.

Even if such a person were to show favor to Nephy and repeat the same actions, she didn't believe that they would yearn for individuality in Nephy herself.

"Master is... one who cares nothing for the weak. Even when he saved a carriage that was being attacked by bandits, Master said that he only did so because he wasn't pleased with the bandits." She also thought that, just perhaps, it was to show Nephy that she should feel at ease.

That scene reminded Nephy of when her village was attacked — though she felt fear instead of guilt. And when she was reminded of that, Nephy had grown pale, which coincided with Zagan attacking the bandits.

"Those things are just rubbish." That was all he said. Without looking for compensation from anyone, and without expecting any sort of praise from Nephy.

...In truth, the person in question wanted to show off his good points to Nephy, but she was unable to recognize that.

Chastille then nodded and let out a groan.

"As I thought, huh...?"

"What... about it?"

"No, it's probably just as you say. In truth, even when we crossed swords, that man held back because I'm a woman. It was humiliating, but, um, how do I put it..." As Chastille started mumbling and hesitated to speak further, Manuela emptied another tankard and made a broad grin.

"Oooh my? What's this, Ms. Angelic Knight? What's with that face? Are you a maiden in love, perhaps?"

"Wh-Wha, don't speak of such insolence!" After shouting that, Chastille's shoulders drooped back down. And then, she continued speaking.

"When I first met him, that man... looked to be in need of saving." And from that single phrase, Nephy's heart shook greatly.

From time to time, Master looked extremely lonely. Especially when he talked about the past, he would often make a sad expression. She didn't know when

and where Zagan and Chastille had met, but knowing that someone other than her knew of that unmasked face Zagan possessed made her feel slightly jealous and also somewhat happy at the same time.

The Master that I know... is surely not a lie. On the evening that they first met, she was able to once more look upon the moon that she never thought she would see again, and was able to stretch out her hands without hesitation. And from right next to her, Zagan gazed at the moon as well.

I can't really grasp anything, huh, as if he was troubled, that was what he thought. There was no way that was a lie. Or so she thought.

Doesn't Master... need to be saved even now...? The face he made when he told Nephy to get out was far more heartbreaking than the one Nephy herself was making.

Nephy put her hand to her chest.

Thanks to Manuela and Chastille hearing her out, she was at least able to regain her composure to the point where she was clearly able to recall Zagan.

Was the Master she knew really someone who'd cast her aside on a whim or because her use had come to an end? *He wouldn't... There's no way.* There was no mistaking that he had his reasons.

Thinking of that, she recalled the word that caught her attention upon parting with Zagan.

"Um, just what is... an Archdemon? Are you aware of it?" Even when she recounted the details to them, she forgot to bring up that name.

Manuela and Chastille then exchanged glances.

"Isn't that the top dog among the sorcerers? Even this town was being controlled by an Archdemon named Marchosias, but since public order was good he didn't really give off an impression of being particularly scary or anything, I think?" Manuela then had one thing to tack on.

"It's just, that Archdemon seems to have passed away recently, and since then there's been that unpleasant incident going around."

"...The serial kidnapping of women, you mean?"

“Yeah, that one. For the time being, the culprit was subjugated by the church, though.” Manuela nodded back to the topic that Chastille brought up. Nephy didn’t really know the details, but she had also at least heard the rumors.

Hearing that the incident was somehow resolved by the church and the Angelic Knights, Nephy tilted her head to the side.

“Considering all that, it doesn’t look like they’re well-liked by the townspeople...”

“Urgh, that’s...”

“That’s ’cause after that, they levied stupidly high donations as a rescue fee. Like that, there’s no way anyone would honestly thank them, right?”

“Even though it’s a donation, they levy them?”

“Yup, makes no sense, right?” As Manuela glanced a glare over to the side, Chastille was there drooping her shoulders in a sad state.

“Um, it’s not like she was the one who directly levied the donations, right? So, I don’t think there’s any point in blaming her.”

Hearing that, Chastille broke into tears once more as she looked at Nephy.

“You’re so kind. I can understand why that man let you stay by his side.”

“Is... that so...?” That was the first time someone had said that to her, so Nephy blankly stared back at her.

And then, Chastille tilted her head to the side.

“We’ve strayed off topic. About the Archdemon, it’s said that they are a symbol of evil that must be overthrown, even if the church must bet the lives of all the Angelic Knights on it. However, in contrast to there being only twelve Sacred Swords, there are thirteen Archdemons. And so, even if each wielder of a Sacred Sword could take one down in death, it would still be insufficient.” The greatest enemy of the church — it seemed that Zagan had become just such an existence.

“If one becomes an Archdemon, must they fight against the church?”

“That’s how it’d go. Currently, one of the Archdemons has passed away, so even the church is thinking of going all out against the sorcerers... I mean, it’s not like I personally think that, alright? Anyways, the church is filled with energy, eager to defeat the sorcerers.” Since Manuela started glaring at her, Chastille corrected herself in a panic.

“If a new Archdemon were born, then the church would likely judge it to be a good opportunity to overthrow them. After all, it’s hard to imagine how powerful they could become if they’re not struck down immediately. Or perhaps, there would be others who aim for the position.” And Zagan had told her to get away from such an Archdemon.

Will it become a massive conflict? Wasn’t that why he tried to keep Nephy far away from there?

Nephy stared at the palm of her hand. Over the course of the last week, Zagan had taught her the basics of simple sorcery. That way, she would have a means of defending herself, and it would also one day help her control her mysticism. But that wasn’t why she’d learned.

I wanted... to be helpful to Master, so I learned sorcery.

Even if she went back, there was a chance she would only burden him. But even so, Nephy stood up.

“I will... return to Master’s side.”

“I-Is that really a good idea? Didn’t you get thrown out?” As Manuela and Chastille looked at her in surprise, Nephy shook her head back to them.

“Master is strong. Surely, he already has the strength not to lose against anybody. But... that doesn’t mean he can’t be hurt.”

“The strong could not understand the feelings of the weak.” That was something Zagan said when he was opening his heart to her. He never said that those words hurt him, but he appeared awfully sad as he spoke them.

There was likely no way he was driven to hate people just from that. But still, she believed that was what made him give up on interacting with others. When

she thought of it that way, Nephy was struck by the sudden urge to embrace him tightly.

“I may not... be of any real use to Master. Still, I don’t think he’ll go unhurt from now on.” With a ‘That’s why,’ Nephy continued.

“I want... to become Master’s pillar of strength.” It may have been conceited of her to wish for that. And, it was possible that he would just drive her out again if she returned. But even so, at that time, when Nephy embraced Zagan, she thought he had finally accepted her. *That’s why... I want to be by his side.*

They had only spent half a month together, but she wanted to believe in the memories they shared.

There was no such thing as a person who was fine with being alone. Even Nephy hated the idea, after all.

Eventually, Chastille smiled.

“I see. Then, shall I go do what I can, too?”

“Huh...? Are you planning... to challenge Master again?”

“No, you’re wrong,” Chastille yelled out with a bright red face.

“That’s not it, you see... I can’t... cover for him, but I think I can wash away the stigma around him.”

“Stigma...?” As Nephy tilted her head to the side, Chastille nodded.

“It seems there’s a sorcerer committing crimes while assuming Zagan’s name.”

Nephy didn’t know that she was referring to the culprit behind the serial kidnappings. And Chastille continued speaking, as if she meant to keep that fact concealed.

“They’re clearly trying to frame him, so I’ll turn the tables on them!”

“Aren’t Angelic Knights and sorcerers hostile to each other?”

“That’s... certainly true, but...” As if it was somewhat uncomfortable, Chastille began muttering.

“Isn’t it just frustrating to be saved twice, and then do nothing in return?” In her own way, she had likely thought about such matters for quite a while.

Manuela then gazed at the two of them with a broad smile on her face.

“Now then, seeing as the two of you are back on your feet, it’s about time we call it a night, huh? Ah, little miss knight, I’ll leave the bill to you, alright!”

“Wh-Wha, I didn’t even order anything!”

Watching Chastille get teased put Nephy at ease for whatever reason. *Just what... is this feeling called, I wonder?*

And while Nephy was perplexed, Manuela wrapped her arms around her.

“Well, if something ever troubles you again, you can come to my place any time. I’ll at least hear out your grumbling. In exchange, I’ll have you try on some of the shop’s goods though, ahahah.”

Staring back at her blankly, Nephy tilted her head to the side.

“Manuela, why are you being so kind to me?” It was a different sensation from when Zagan treated her kindly.

And Manuela stared back at her, as if she was shocked that Nephy didn’t even know that herself.

“Isn’t it obviously ‘cause we’re friends?” Hearing that word she was not used to, Nephy unintentionally gulped.

“Friends...”

“Eh, we’re not?”

“...I don’t know. Until now, there was never... anyone who said that to me.” The word friend made her think of the relationship between Zagan and Barbatos. Zagan would call him names, but there was a strange relaxed manner between them, and honestly speaking Nephy was just a little jealous of them. Surely, that sort of relationship was called friendship.

Manuela made a surprised face for just a moment, but then immediately began laughing.

“Then, that means I’m your first friend, right? Best regards!”

“U-Um... Yes.”

“Wow, your ears are bright red, you know? Are you alright?”

And then, Chastille timidly raised her hand.

“Um, is it okay... if I also think the same?”

“About what?”

“Um, I also... wish to consider you a friend!”

“Eeeh? Aren’t you an Angelic Knight? Is it okay to be friends with a sorcerer?”

“Come on!” Seeing Chastille moved to tears again, Manuela covered her up with her prided wings. And then, she combed through the Angelic Knight’s red hair as if there was no other choice.

“If you weren’t a friend, then we couldn’t tease you like this, right?”

“Is teasing... an essential part of friendship?” While making an awfully dissatisfied face, Chastille still looked relieved.

And then, after leaving the shop, just as they were about to split up...

“Lady Chastille!”

The ladies heard a deep voice come from across the street. As they shifted their attention toward the source, they saw three men wearing Anointed Armor rush over. Feeling like she recognized those rugged figures from somewhere, Nephy squinted her eyes.

“Erk, y-you’re that bitch from before!” Perhaps sensing that he was being glared at, a lanky man leaped out from the group.

And then, Nephy recalled who he was.

“The person... who injured Master that time...?”

“Eh, what? Did those guys also injure Nephy’s master? This is why the church is so...”

“Like I’ve been saying, why are you so hostile toward the church?” The Angelic Knights each readied their weapons, and Chastille cut through as if to mediate between them. And at that exact moment...

“Hehehe, little ones getting along, sure is beautiful, huh?” Nephy heard that creepy voice from directly behind her.

And immediately following that, a swamp like darkness expanded around her feet.

“Eh—” Completely unaware of what was going on, Nephy was dragged into the darkness, which had already swallowed her up to her waist.

“Nephy— Khh!?” Even as Chastille tried drawing her Sacred Sword, she was grasped by the mud-like darkness. With her arm pinned down, she was dragged down without ever being able to draw her weapon.

“Lady Chastille!” The Angelic Knights came rushing over, but there was no way they were going to make it in time. Even so, Chastille was an Angelic Knight.

“Run... away... Manuela.” She was being swallowed whole, but she still managed to push Manuela away.

Following that, the avian girl spread her wings to escape into the sky. However, a pitch-black feeler still launched toward her as she rose to the sky in a panic to try and run away.

“Ugh, protect the citizen!” And having finally caught up, the Angelic Knights mowed down the feeler with their swords.

“Tch, so one got away, huh? Well, whatever! Listen well, my name is Zagan! If you wish to rescue these people, then come face me at my castle!” The master of darkness said that in a voice that didn’t suit Zagan, even if it *did* sound like him.

Nephy recognized the voice instantly.

“Why... are you...” And within that darkness, a familiar face came to mind.



A few hours later, Zagan was looking up at the night sky from the entrance of his castle.

On the evening of the day they first met, Nephy stretched her hands out toward the moon. What meaning did that action have? He had never quite

figured it out, and now had no way to.

Zagan stretched his hands out toward the moon once more, but as expected, he couldn't grasp anything.

No, at that time, I may have just grasped it.

Because at that time, the first girl to ever steal his heart stood beside him.

"This place is real quiet when I'm all alone, huh? Guess it's always been this way..." It was far too quiet, to the point where his ears hurt.

Nephy was not a very talkative girl, but the sound of her bustling about as she cleaned or cooked here and there certainly did make the castle seem more lively.

In that uninhabited forest, Zagan stood stock-still, mulling over his thoughts. And beneath his feet, a moan rang out.

"Guoooh, ridiculous... We... Knights of the Azure Sky couldn't put a scratch on you..." It was the three idiots... no, Angelic Knights, who trespassed some time ago. Because they came storming in, seething with anger, Zagan went out to meet them.

Did they already hear about me becoming an Archdemon? He felt like it was too early for that to be the case, but none of that really mattered.

Nephy was no longer there. And honestly, Zagan was unable to forget her pained expression as he told her to get out.

I hurt her... Yeah.

That much was obvious. It was painful to be alone, after all, and Nephy probably understood that fact far too well.

However, after an eternity of loneliness, she had finally opened her heart to him, choosing to finally show some emotion. However, after accepting her like that, and getting her to believe in him, he thrust her away at his own convenience. That act was likely far more cruel than just hurting her.

But, if it's that lot in town, then they'll surely treat her well.

Zagan knew that the citizens of Kianoides received Nephy favorably when she

went out shopping. He felt she would likely even be able to deceive the eyes of the church, too.

In the first place, Nephy had only been involved with Zagan for a mere half a month. Once the remaining heat cooled off, even if they searched for a relationship, there would be nothing to find.

She would be able to peacefully live within the warm light completely unrelated to things like sorcerers and the church. A far better fate, in his humble opinion.

Everything would work out peacefully. Everything would simply return to the way it was before he met Nephy.

And then, just as Zagan was about to return to the castle...

“Wait...” One of Angelic Knights who was lying on the ground grabbed Zagan’s foot. His Anointed Armor had been smashed, and even his precious longsword had been broken to bits.

Zagan let out a tired sigh as he forced himself to respond.

“Listen, I’m in a bad mood right now. Don’t think I’ll be so kind as to hold back on you like I did last time, alright?”

The only reason the three of them weren’t dead was because they were defeated by a trap before Zagan had to handle anything himself. Therefore, it was a matter which didn’t even have anything to do with him holding back.

Now that I think of it, this trap is something that Nephy made... As an experiment to help control her mysticism, he tried loading in mysticism that would be unleashed given a certain condition.

They were Angelic Knights who possessed enough strength to reach the front of Zagan’s castle, so he figured the experiment was a success since it managed to defeat them. Though by that point, he had no method of relaying the success to Nephy.

As Zagan kicked away the Angelic Knight’s hand, he appealed to him in a voice that felt like he was vomiting out blood.

“We do not mind whatever happens to us! However, just our lady... Please,

just spare Lady Chastille.”

“Chastille...?” Now that he mentioned it, Zagan couldn’t spot the girl who wielded the Sacred Sword anywhere. He simply thought the three Angelic Knights were being impertinent, though...

“Our lady... said that you weren’t the damn culprit behind the kidnappings, and even confronted His Eminence the Cardinal about finding the true culprit. If you truly aren’t the culprit, then it should be fine to at least overlook just her, right?”

“...I don’t get what you’re talking about.” Zagan was aware that he was being framed as the culprit behind the serial kidnappings in Kianoides. However, he didn’t feel like the Angelic Knights were speaking like they were confused, either.

“Was she kidnapped?”

“Don’t play dumb! Was it not you who dragged Lady Chastille into the shadows and told us to come here, you bastard!?”

At that, Zagan finally came to an understanding. It seemed these Angelic Knights came charging over because they were under the impression that Zagan had kidnapped Chastille.

They were being made to dance by some fraud, but from Zagan’s fight with Chastille, he showed that he could fight on an equal field with her even while holding back. That likely made it unnecessarily believable.

Or perhaps, that was a production set up to instigate these guys in the first place? If Zagan had killed Chastille at that time, the church would have likely poured all their energy into his subjugation as he’d have murdered an Archangel. Even if he spared her and let her go, just like right now, they were able to make Zagan out to be the culprit after abducting her.

The attack on that day itself may have been something devised for this exact purpose.

“If that’s the case, it’s quite well prepared, huh?” And then he thought to himself, *I see. So she was kidnapped.*

She was an Angelic Knight who tried to save Zagan, so he believed she wasn't someone he had to really worry about, and also felt that he didn't hate her.

However, he only saved her because she just happened to be on the verge of death in front of his eyes. Back then, he didn't know where she was carried off to, and more importantly he didn't even know if she was still alive, so if he was told to go save her, he couldn't help but worry about it.

"Return... Lady Chastille... to us..."

It also discouraged him to have criticism thrown at him for no real reason. And so, though just leaving her to die left a bad taste in his mouth, he lost the will to help. Originally, Zagan had that sort of uncooperative personality. He may not have been evil, but he was most definitely not good, either.

And while he was mulling over a decision...

"Mr. Sorcerer!" From the skies, that voice came down at him.

Because of the Angelic Knights' intrusion, the barrier around his castle had lost its meaning.

"What is it this time?" While saying that, he took a single step back. And immediately following that, a woman fell from the sky.

"Yowza!" And that very same woman landed on top of the head of one of the Angelic Knights.

Looking at her face, Zagan knit his brows.

"You're...?" What came down from the skies... was an avian with golden hair. He recalled seeing her before. It was the clerk at the store where he bought Nephy's clothes.

The Angelic Knight who was being used as a foot stool then raised his voice in anger.

"You bitch, why are you getting in the way?"

"Like I've been saying, the culprit isn't this person, right?"

"What the hell are you saying!? Didn't you also rush here?"

"Well, didn't we come here to ask for help!? Why are you rushing in to

attack?" Seeing the girl and the Angelic Knights begin to quarrel, Zagan let out a sigh.

What a pain... I guess I'll just throw them out. As Zagan began using a magic circle, the girl clung to him.

"Mr. Sorcerer, help. Those girls... Nephy and Chastille have been taken away!"

"What'd you say?" He didn't know why Nephy's name came up there, but Zagan let out a groan.

The three Angelic Knights on the ground also mentioned kidnapping. The serial kidnappings in Kianoides had yet to end. Plus, now it seemed even Nephy had gotten involved in them.

No, that's not right. If Zagan was right about the culprit's identity, then this was surely an attempt to provoke him. They specifically aimed for her because she was both Zagan's servant and disciple.

It's quite far away, but is it too late? And as he groaned, Manuela shook his shoulders.

"I'm begging you, please help. Someone as strong as you can definitely save them, right?"

"B-But..." If Zagan openly went to save her, this time around it would be known that Nephy was related to him. She would be completely thought of as one of his comrades. She would no longer be able to run away from the church.

Of course, he had no intention of abandoning her, but he had to think of a way of maneuvering that concealed his involvement. He couldn't just fly over there right away.

And seeing Zagan conflicted like that, Manuela decided to chew him out.

"What are you wavering for? Nephy was on her way back to you... She didn't care about the consequences and just wanted to stay by your side! How can you ignore her when she needs help!?"

"What... did you just say?" As Zagan opened his eyes wide, Manuela appealed to him in a wistful tone.

"I heard how you drove her away. But even so, Nephy said she wanted to be

by your side, that she wanted to support you. That's why, no matter how many times you pushed her away, she said she would always return." Manuela then grabbed Zagan's chest.

"Do you sorcerers really feel nothing when someone holds you so dear? If that's true, Then why were you ever so kind to her!?" With a thud, Manuela struck Zagan's chest.

It was the hand of neither an Angelic Knight nor a sorcerer, just that of a woman. And yet, it hurt. It hurt far more than any attack he'd received before.

Nephy... was coming back? Back to me, who said such a cruel thing to her...?

He didn't even need to think of why.

Zagan had been watching Nephy carefully during their time together, so the reason why she would do that was something he knew without even having to see her ears, which were so full of emotion.

She was thinking of him. Of the horrendous villain, Zagan. Though honestly, if she was going to do so, it would have been far better if she thought of a more noble person.

Zagan quickly realized he was past the point of no return. And so, he let out a deep sigh.

"...You're right. It's just as you say." Then, he laughed and continued, saying, "Sorcerers are trash, through and through. They only think of themselves, only treat others as mere tools, and think of life and death as things to play with on a whim."

"Wh-What are you saying..."

"And, as a sorcerer like that, something must have been wrong with me." Even if it was a momentary delusion, sympathizing with Nephy was completely foolish.

That's right. Sorcerers... should only think about what benefits them.

There was no need for him to go through such painful feelings. After all, it would have been fine for him to just proceed onward as he pleased.

When he first met that girl, he should have done so without faltering. Just like

when he reduced the torture device and bandits to ash because she was scared. Just like when he protected her without even thinking when the Angelic Knight aimed his spear at her.

And in response to the avian girl, who had turned remarkably pale, Zagan said the following:

“You have my thanks. Because of you, my mind is clear.” His path was clear since the very beginning. That was why Zagan stepped forth.

“Nephy belongs to me. I must drown the idiot who made a move on her in a pool of blood.” His own hands would be stained, but that didn’t matter at all since sorcerers were sinful creatures.

Even if he had to sacrifice all the authority and mana that came with the title Archdemon, it would’ve been fine if he could just protect Nephy from everything.

And yet, I chickened out. The twelve Archdemon... He’d lost his spirit upon meeting them because he felt they were on a completely different level. That was why he’d thrown a tantrum, and ended up hurting Nephy.

Can I still.... get her back? He didn’t know.

However, he knew there was only one thing left for him to do. And then, he remembered the dumbfounded Angelic Knights.

While I’m at it, I guess I’ll save Chastille too. If she was captured alongside Nephy, then he’d inevitably meet her.

As Zagan tapped the floor with his heel, a large magic circle spread out beneath his feet. It was the teleportation magic circle he used some time ago when he threw Chastille out of his domain.

This time around, it was connected to a certain sorcerer’s base. *I know full well... exactly who the culprit is.*

And then, Zagan shifted his attention to the avian girl.

“You... got angry for Nephy’s sake. Why is that?”

“Isn’t it obviously... ’Cause we’re friends, duh!” And as Manuela replied, Zagan stuck his hand out to her.

“Then, will you tag along? To go and save Nephy, I mean.”

“...Uh, sure, I’ll go.” And below them, the Angelic Knights groaned as they raised their voices.

“W-Wait... we will also... For Lady Chastille...” They should have already been unable to stand up, but the three Angelic Knights clung to Zagan’s legs and begged to join him.

“...Yeah, I get it, don’t worry. I’ll bring you along, so get your filthy hands off me.”

And just like that, the odd combination of a sorcerer, three Angelic Knights, and a clerk of a clothing store, vanished into the magic circle.



“Nephy, are you... injured?”

Nephy found herself inside a gloomy prison as she came to her senses. It was likely a place that was remodeled from a cave of some sort. The ground and walls were all stone, and there were multiple pointed rocks hanging from the ceiling. Stalactites, clearly. Judging from how there were no stalagmites coming from the ground, the ground beneath their feet had likely been prepared with soil. There were no bars, but in its stead were chains hanging from the wall.

As she shifted her focus over to the source of the light, she could see a large chamber deep within. It seemed a magic circle was radiating light, but it was unusually large.

From her position, Nephy was unable to see each part of it, but thinking of the full size of the circle, it may have even been larger than a portion of the hall in Zagan’s castle.

The sound of clanging chains rang out. A collar had been placed around Nephy’s neck once again. She even had shackles around her hands and feet this time, and she could tell that each one of them had the power to seal mana.

Next to her, Chastille was also tied up, but her Sacred Sword and Anointed Armor had been stripped from her and she had shackles on. The girl, who was now only wearing a shirt and a skirt, looked nothing more than a normal girl, to

the point where it would be hard to believe she was an Angelic Knight.

Their chains were connected to the stone wall, and it didn't look like they could leave it to their strength to get out.

If it was the Nephy from before, then she would have just given up on everything. She was likely about to be killed, after all. But things were different now.

I decided... that I would return to Master. And so, she simply had to escape.

However, with the shackles and collar on, she couldn't use sorcery, and there wasn't enough nature around them to use mysticism, either. Mysticism wasn't a power that could be used without any limitations like sorcerers thought.

After squirming for a while, Nephy took a look at her surroundings.

"Where...?"

"I don't know. I think it's the hideout of the sorcerer who attacked us, though." And then, footsteps drew closer to them.

Chastille stood up to cover Nephy, but she was also chained to the wall. And so, all she could do was defenselessly expose herself.

And what showed up was, as expected, someone that Nephy knew.

"Were you not Master's friend... Barbatos." The sorcerer who visited Zagan as a friend. She couldn't quite say that they got along well, but they still looked to be quite close.

Upon hearing that, a smile floated up to Barbatos' thin face.

"Friends!? Oh, how surprising. I didn't think there were any people out there who could look at a sorcerer and think such a thing." While laughing, Barbatos grasped Nephy's cheek with an eagle-clawed grip.

"Among the sorcerers that guy killed, was a man called Resentment... Andras. He was the first sorcerer Zagan killed. And you see, I was his disciple..."

Nephy's eyes opened wide in shock as she heard that.

“Oops, don’t misunderstand, alright? Getting revenge for a teacher isn’t something sorcerers do. If Zagan didn’t kill him, then I would’ve done it eventually.” Nephy could not sense any deceit or resentment in his words. Those words likely weren’t a bluff, but his true intentions.

“However, that castle that guy’s stretching his legs in, the gold he used to buy you, and even the wisdom he gained were all things I was supposed to inherit. It doesn’t sit well to just stay silent and hand it over, right?” Next, he looked over to Chastille.

“In the beginning, I tried to instigate that lot from the church, but nothing went smoothly. My damn subordinates were easily tracked down, and the people I sent to face Zagan had the tables turned on them so easily. I was hoping that if he faced a Sacred Sword, he’d at least get one of his arms lopped off or something, though.”

Nephy was taken aback. Barbatos had visited the castle immediately after the Angelic Knights attacked, and not only that, he was worried about the state of Zagan’s wounds. However, it seemed that was for a nefarious purpose, and not true concern.

If not for Nephy’s mysticism, he truly would have been stuck fighting one-handed.

Chastille was surely glaring at Barbatos.

“It can’t be... You’re the culprit behind the kidnappings!?”

“What’s that? You only just realized it?”

The mastermind behind the kidnappings... Nephy recalled that Zagan said ‘it was an incident that looked like they were practically trying to draw the attention of the church.’

Perhaps... Master already knows who the culprit is. He didn’t reveal a name, but had a rather bitter expression on his face as he spoke of it.

Chastille then roared in a trembling voice.

“Did you cause such a repulsive incident just to frame Zagan, you bastard?”

“No way? Heeheehee.” Barbatos began laughing in a creepy way.

“The one who suggested using sacrifices was that Face Peeler guy, and I played along ’cause I needed a way to display my power.”

“To display...? For what purpose?”

“Isn’t there only one answer to that question? The twelve Archdemons!” Barbatos spread out both his arms.

“It’s to show the Archdemons that I’m clearly fit to join their ranks! It’s also the one and only method of eliminating all those other candidates.” And then, Barbatos drew his face closer to Nephy.

“Honestly, I was a little troubled when I had my damn sacrifices snatched away, but you’ve fallen into my hands. With the mana of a white-haired elf, I’ll be able to open the door...” Nephy glared back at Barbatos expressionlessly.

“My apologies, but that is likely meaningless.”

“Hmm, you sure can talk. You think I won’t kill you or something? Or... could it be that... What, you think Zagan’s gonna come save you?”

“Zagan’s gonna come save you.” Nephy’s chest tightened up and began hurting as she heard those words.

Will Master... really end up coming? In the first place, he didn’t even know that Nephy had been captured. Also, for whatever reason, he was trying to distance himself from her.

Nephy didn’t think he’d cast her out from his heart. Someone who did that... wouldn’t make such a painful face. But even so, he may have had a reason not to come and save Nephy.

Nephy then shook her head. *That’s not it.* Once more, she was thinking like the weak. *I decided to be helpful, so what am I doing holding Master back?*

If she couldn’t do something about such a trivial issue, then there was no point returning to his service.

After coming to that realization, Nephy stared fixedly at Barbatos while maintaining her expressionless look.

“You’re wrong. I do not intend to cause any trouble for Master over something like this. I’m trying to tell you something else.”

“Oh, what?”

“Master has already inherited the Archdemon title.”

All expression vanished from Barbatos’ face.

“...You’re lying.”

“I speak nothing but the truth. Apparently that’s why he dismissed me.”

Unsteady on his feet, Barbatos took a step back.

“Impossible. That guy’s... an Archdemon?” Barbatos started scratching his head desperately.



“He wasn’t satisfied with stealing Andras’ legacy from me, so he even took the seat of Archdemon?” After that, he turned to Nephy with a blistering glare.

As she stepped back upon feeling her body shuddering, he pulled on Nephy’s collar.

“Ugh...” Her hands and feet were tied up, so Nephy was unable to brace herself as she fell to the ground.

“Come!” Barbatos dragged her toward the large hall.

“That guy’s an Archdemon? Fine, bring it on. I’ll just have to steal that title from him by force. As long as I can complete this ritual, it doesn’t matter if he’s an Archdemon or anything else.” An ominous magic circle was drawn in front of them. It even looked connected to the walls. It was the enormous magic circle she saw earlier.

A massive crest was carved into its center, and surrounding it were dozens of layers of detailed crests that served as the ‘circuit.’ Even Nephy could tell that the entire magic circle had been drawn with blood. She wondered how many sacrifices were needed to draw such a complex magic circle.

And, at that point, she knew that she would be added on as the ‘finishing touch.’

Coming to the same realization, Chastille yelled out in anger.

“S-Stop! If you’re going to use a sacrifice, then choose me. As an Angelic Knight, I have at least resolved myself for such a fate!”

Barbatos glared at Chastille suspiciously when he heard that.

“Even if you don’t coax me like that, you don’t need to worry. I’ll use you for something else. This ritual requires the best of tools, you see?”

Nephy bit down on her teeth at those words. Tool, he said. True, Nephy had grown used to being called that throughout her life.

But... Master never once called me a tool. And she still hadn’t repaid him for that. As such, there was no way she could just die here.

I want to live. That was the very first time that Nephy wished for that on her

own.

“I’ll live... and return... to Master’s side.” He might turn her away. He might scold her. But even so, she wanted to stubbornly remain in the castle.

When morning came, she’d make breakfast, and watch and wait until Zagan cleaned his plate. And if cooking three meals a day wasn’t enough, then she would try letting him sleep on her lap again. She was willing to do anything, as long as it made Zagan happy.

When it comes to a test of endurance, I won’t even lose to Master.

There were days where she did nothing but obey like a corpse. Compared to those times, where she lived in a place without a trace of warmth, Zagan’s place was paradise.

He may not have had a particular need for Nephy. And honestly, there was always the possibility that he’d eventually come to treasure someone far more than her, but...

But you can’t remain alone, Master.

Loneliness killed one’s heart. It made them lose all their feelings, and the entire world lost its color when seen through such eyes.

Something like that could not be considered truly living. Nephy, who had survived day by day with no desires, wanted to grant that vivid world to none other than Zagan.

That was why she wanted to support him more than anything else in the world. And so, she resisted Barbatos.

“Let... go.”

“Tch, this bitch!” Barbatos then irritatingly yanked on the chain, which made Nephy fall to the ground again. Dragged along the ground, blood spilled out of her arms and legs.

Tears welled up from the pain. However, Nephy simply grit her teeth and glared at Barbatos.

Something like this... isn’t at all painful. It was nothing compared to when Zagan told her to get out. Nothing compared to when she saw that sorrowful

expression of his.

That was why Nephy roared out a stunning declaration.

“I belong to Master. I don’t want to be touched by the likes of you!”

Barbatos’ face twisted into a pleased expression as he heard those words.

“You lowly fucking slave, don’t get conceited!” Barbatos raised his hand, motioning to strike her. If she was hit by a sorcerer’s full strength, then Nephy’s dainty body would give in with little resistance.

And yet, Nephy didn’t avert her gaze. As she braced herself for the impact... A thunderous roar rocked the cave as the stone wall crumbled.

“Wh-What’s going on?”

And a man suddenly stalked out of the cloud of dust formed by the explosion. That very man began to speak to Barbatos as he let out an ‘Ah.’

“Well said, Nephy. I would expect as much of my disciple, really.”

Her master, the one she wanted to meet more than anybody else in the world, was standing before her.



“Yo, Barbatos. It’s been about a week, right?” Zagan called out to him like always, as if he was just speaking casually to a close friend.

Barbatos’ face grew noticeably stiff at that.

After Manuela came over, Zagan rushed straight over. He knew of all of Barbatos’ hideouts, and since it was Kianoides, there was a rather limited selection among the bunch.

There were other potential prospects, but Zagan intended on just going through them one by one. The fact that he managed to find Nephy in one shot was just good luck.

“Um, you know, Mr. Sorcerer. Is this alright? I heard sorcerers are at an absurd disadvantage in the domain of another sorcerer...” Manuela was speaking in a completely frightened tone as she followed behind Zagan, but all he did was shrug his shoulders.

Incidentally, since the three Angelic Knights weren't in any condition to fight, they were set aside elsewhere.

And perhaps having regained some of his composure after hearing that, Barbatos stared at Zagan.

"How long... have you known?" The reason why he didn't ask why Zagan came here... was likely because Barbatos had prepared for such a situation.

Zagan then replied while scratching the back of his neck.

"I've more or less been suspicious since that Face Peeler or whatever sorcerer came by?" He was talking about the sorcerer who attacked Chastille.

Now that I think of it, is she also here? As he took a look around, he spotted the girl in question chained to a wall... She was an Angelic Knight who seemed to lose to sorcerers quite often, and he sympathized with her just a little for that.

Anyway, after confirming her presence, Zagan returned his gaze to Barbatos.

"When I tried to throw that woman out, you came by like you were checking up on the result. Wouldn't I be crazy not to suspect you?" He'd grown sure of Barbatos' involvement after he heard the story from the Archdemons, but he'd held misgivings the entire time.

The reason he never went as far as to speak of it... was simply because he didn't really care either way. He did somewhat consider Barbatos a friend, so he held no concern as to whether Barbatos betrayed him.

Barbatos then made a face like he found this unexpected.

"You had some nerve... to accept my invitation to the auction like that..."

"I was interested in just what it was you were planning. Besides, I was honestly curious about the Archdemon's legacy." Looking at it in hindsight, thanks to that, Zagan managed to meet Nephy. In that sense, he was almost grateful to the man before him.

After returning a bitter smile, Zagan continued with a 'But before that.'

"You... injured Nephy, right?" The ground broke apart. The bedrock cracked from Zagan taking a single step forward.

“Ugh...” By the time Barbatos raised his guard, Zagan was already standing right before him.

“You son of a—”

“First, your arms.” Barbatos thrust out his arms as if to put some kind of sorcery to use, but Zagan brushed them aside with a single hand. As an unpleasant crack rang through the air, both of Barbatos’ arms bent in an impossible direction.

“Wha—?”

“Next, your knee.” In response to Barbatos’ scream, Zagan mercilessly tripped him up. No, that wasn’t exactly accurate. He kicked Barbatos’ knee diagonally from above. From that single strike, the joint in his knee shattered into pieces.

“AGUAAAH!” Barbatos fainted, foaming at the mouth all the while.

It had been mere moments since Zagan stepped in.

Throwing a backward glance at his undesirable friend, who had his arms and leg crushed and was spread out on the ground like a caterpillar, Zagan fell to a knee in front of Nephy.

He tore off the shackles binding her hands and feet through sheer strength, and then went to remove the collar. The one she was wearing was different from before, and could luckily be removed by force without any real tricks.

Verifying that there was nothing left binding her, Zagan finally gazed at Nephy’s face. Her snow-white hair was dirtied with mud, and her eyes had tears in them.

“Aaah, um... Did it... hurt?”

“It... definitely hurt.”

“It did, didn’t it...? Sorry.” With a thump, Nephy struck his chest.

“Rather than me, Master, you looked to be... in far more pain.”

“...I did?”

Large teardrops fell from Nephy’s eyes as she continued.

“I’m not sure what happened to you, Master. If you say that you have no

need for me, then I'll accept it, but—" Nephy clung to Zagan's chest tightly, then said, "There's no way... I would be fine with it hurting you, Master!"

That was the first time he'd heard Nephy speak so loudly.

"Do I... look like I'm hurt?"

"Yes."

"Honestly, I'd say I'm the one causing you pain..."

"That is a different matter from whether or not you're hurt yourself, Master."

"As I thought, I did... hurt you, huh?"

"Please don't try to change the subject," Nephy said, acting awfully strict. And, while still clinging to him, Nephy looked up at Zagan's face.

"Please don't... leave me on my own, Master." Slowly but steadily, heat rose up in the depths of his chest.

Did I... leave you all alone? And yet, far from cursing him out, that was what Nephy said.

The idea of hugging her and attempting to win her back seemed far too much of a stretch after all this time.

"Nephy..." But more than anything else, at that moment, there was something he simply had to say to her.



And just as he tried to speak those words...

“You asshole, don’t just act like you’ve won without even fucking finishing me off!” Barbatos stood up, having likely restored his smashed arms and legs.

Below his feet, a blood red magic circle spread out.

“Master!” Nephy let out a scream, but Zagan just calmly brushed her head.

“Don’t worry. Nothing will happen.”

“Wha—?”

And sure enough, just as Zagan said, nothing came out of the magic circle. There was no way that Barbatos didn’t invoke his sorcery. However, even though he had, nothing happened.

“What... happened...?” As Nephy donned a puzzled expression, Zagan spoke up.

“Before, we talked about an ultimate sorcery that existed in theory, right?” It was a sorcery which destroyed other sorcery by adding a circuit on the interior of a magic circle. It existed in theory, but was impossible in practice.

“To tell you the truth, there is an underhanded method of using it.” He then ran his finger through the air as he said that, drawing a magic circle identical to the one on the ground.

“If it’s an exact copy of your opponent’s magic circle, then you can stack it up on the inside. If you do that, then a resonance-like phenomenon will occur.”

The first time Zagan used sorcery was when he was eight years old. At the time, the juvenile vagrant Zagan was captured by Resentment Andras to be a sacrifice.

Zagan already understood what it meant for a child like him with an unknown identity to be captured by a sorcerer. That was why he memorized the shape of the magic circle when he was captured, and secretly drew it on his own arm. Since he had nothing to write with, Zagan even used his own blood.

Thinking back on it, it was nothing but the shallow idea of a child. After all, an amateur who was merely imitating the shape could never use something like

sorcery. And yet, Zagan somehow succeeded.

As he tried to run away, he was discovered by Andras, and right when Zagan was about to be killed by a lightning bolt... Zagan used the exact same sorcery.

It was likely just a coincidence. When the exact same sorcery was invoked with just the slightest time lag between them, the resonating sorcery rebounded on Andras.

It wasn't as simple a phenomenon as it sounded, however. If one just tried stacking up identical sorcery, they would either both spontaneously discharge or all of it would return to the one who tried to do so. In the first place, the invocation would likely never make it in time.

It was a miracle which occurred because the exact same sorcery was piled atop an enemy's in a fraction of a second. and just like that, Zagan killed Andras.

He did so with a technique that belonged only to Zagan — the power that made those twelve Archdemons choose Zagan as a sworn friend.

Barbatos then drew back.

"R-Ridiculous... Are you saying... that's Andras' legacy?"

"Andras...? Ah, now that you mention it, there *was* a guy with that name... Was he also able to accomplish such a feat?" Taking that into consideration, he sure did die awfully easily.

Likely knowing that this wasn't the case, Barbatos turned completely blue in the face.

"Wh-What the hell are yooooooooou!?" Having become completely frantic, Barbatos began firing out sorcery blindly.

This was within his barrier. Barbatos' power was lifted to its utmost limits, and conversely, Zagan's power was remarkably decayed.

Nevertheless, not a single one of Barbatos' attacks hit their mark. Instead, they simply vanished right before Zagan. He'd copied the magic circle of every single sorcery Barbatos invoked, making 'resonance' occur.

He carried this out in an instant, even against thing he was only witnessing for the very first time.

If there was anything to describe as Zagan's talent, then this would be it.

Nephy then muttered in astonishment.

"But... why is nothing happening? If the same sorcery is piled atop each other, then wouldn't the sorcery itself still activate...?"

"Good point, Nephy." Zagan honestly praised his disciple, who spotted the crux of the situation.

"I only explained the basics to you. Even an amateur can do it with the right timing. Still, sorcery is something one develops, no?"

The very first thing Zagan learned was the reflection of sorcery through resonance. And so, his life as a sorcerer began as he attempted to figure out if he could use resonance to do more than reflect.

Before long, he succeeded in reducing the sorcery he used resonance on into his own mana.

After allowing Barbatos to go wild for a while, Zagan flung back his robe and spread out his arms. And there were several visible magic circles on his right arm.

The magic circles were all in an activated state, and mana was continuously circulating through them.

"Can you see it? These are magic circles that have converted the sorcery Barbatos has been throwing out." In other words, they had absorbed his sorcery.

The use of sorcery itself fueled Zagan's power. Even if an Archdemon were to attack, Zagan couldn't be killed with sorcery. And that exact power allowed him to succeed Marchosias.

"Having said that, I still can't convert it into anything but sorcery I specialize in. There's a need for me to develop it to a point where I can apply it to any sorcery." His power was still far too unrefined. That was why the Archdemons called Zagan a pygmy.

After hearing all that, Barbatos' face twisted in fear.

"Are you saying... you devoured my sorcery?" Being able to come up with

such an expression at a glance showed that he was also a first-rate sorcerer.

The sorcery that Zagan specialized most in... was physical enhancement. He would cause resonance in the sorcery that other sorcerers fired out, then convert it to enhance his own body. It would only be appropriate to call that devouring sorcery.

Suddenly, Zagan spoke as if he suddenly recalled something.

“Oh, right, Barbatos. I’ve finally been given a second name.” He clenched his right hand into a fist, and the magic circle coiling around his arm rotated as it shined.

“‘Sorcerer Slayer’... Yeah, that seems to be my second name.” And then, he threw out his fist.

Barbatos likely had some sort of defense in place. However, all of his sorcery had been absorbed by Zagan. Even if he enhanced his body, there was no sorcerer out there who excelled at physical enhancement more than his opponent.

In short, if Zagan swung his fist, no sorcerer could stop it. Even if, for example, he faced an Archdemon.

“Urk...” Zagan’s fist drilled into Barbatos’ abdomen. His internal organs ruptured, and even the feeling of his spine being crushed was passed along to Zagan.

As Barbatos was blown away, he tumbled across the enormous magic circle that was spread out throughout the hall. Eventually, he came to a halt, but could only bleed as he began convulsing.

Taking that opportunity, Zagan gave chase at a relaxed pace.

“W-Wait a minute. It’s... my loss. I can’t... fight any more. I won’t... show my face... in front of you... ever again... I swear. I’ll also... transfer all my knowledge... to you.”

Zagan clenched his fist as Barbatos started begging for his life. The number of magic circles coiling around his arm had decreased in number, but there were

still plenty left.

Barbatos' face turned pale as he saw that.

"Zagan... we're friends... right?"

That unsightly comment made Zagan tilt his head to the side in confusion.

"Does the concept of friends... even exist to a sorcerer?" And then, he swung his fist downward.

The bedrock collapsed, and the magic circle drawn across the large hall crumbled without leaving a trace. The destruction didn't stop with only the floor, however, and even stretched out to the walls and ceiling. Those cracks encroached as far as the wall that Chastille was bound to and undid her chains.

As for Barbatos, who took that attack full force, there wasn't even a lump of meat left... or that was how it should have been.

"H-Huh...?" Barbatos' eyes peeled back. Zagan's fist had landed directly to the side of his head. And in response to his undesirable friend's pathetic look, Zagan laughed.

"Hahaha, I'm kidding. Don't piss yourself, man."

"Y-You...? The hell are you planning?"

Zagan shrugged his shoulders at those words.

"Well, it's fine to kill you and all, but then I won't be able to drink good liquor anymore. I know nothing about how to judge quality, after all."

"Are you pitying me...?"

"Call it having the leisure to do so."

Barbatos scowled at Zagan before responding.

“Don’t fuck with me... If you let me live, I’ll definitely kill you. Like hell I’ll ever give up!”

“I don’t care. Whenever you lose, I’ll just have you hand over some good liquor.” Barbatos then opened his eyes wide, finally realizing what Zagan was saying.

“You... What the hell? Are you saying there’s some benefit to letting an enemy live?”

“Yeah, about that...” Zagan suddenly clapped his hand together as if he’d forgotten something.

“Barbatos, I succeeded Archdemon Marchosias.”

Barbatos tightly clenched his teeth as if it were frustrating. And, while watching him do so, Zagan continued speaking.

“Don’t you find an Archdemon who doesn’t give a crap about the rules and laws way cooler?” The twelve Archdemons were overwhelmingly powerful and terrifying.

And after meeting them, after achieving the dream of every single sorcerer, he had fully realized something. That he felt fear.

Don’t screw with me. How had he misunderstood everything so badly? Didn’t he become stronger because he wanted to live? Didn’t he aim for strength *because* he hated being victimized? If he were to yield to the strength of another, then that was the same as betraying himself.

Because I was so pathetic, I even ended up hurting Nephy. Zagan wasn’t the type to remain a sore loser. That was why he boldly declared his intent...

“I’ll conduct myself however I want. If I want to let Nephy live under the light of day, then I simply have to dominate all under that light itself.” And once more, he looked down on Barbatos.

“That’s why I won’t kill you. Because I decided not to. If you don’t like it, then force me to obey you with your own strength.”

Exhausted, Barbatos stretched out his limbs. He admitted that he had lost not only in terms of power, but also in terms of spirit. In the truest sense, it was his

loss.

“What an arrogant ass.”

“Damn straight. Without arrogance, how will I ever survive as an Archdemon?” And just as Zagan replied... the magic circle that was spread across the hall, which should have crumbled to pieces, began glowing faintly.

“...Hey, you still wanna go, Barbatos?” As expected, Zagan was making an exasperated face, but Barbatos shook his head.

“N-No, that isn’t on me.”

Zagan looked down at where he planted his fist. It was the center of the magic circle. Zagan’s sorcery was one which resonated with other sorcery, so he may have unconsciously interfered with the magic circle.

What’s this? A bizarre amount of mana is gathering? It was a power that even Zagan couldn’t absorb. It wasn’t off by much, but it surpassed the maximum permissible limit of a human.

“...The hell were you planning on doing here?”

Barbatos’ face spasmed with a twitch.

“It should have... summoned a real demon.” The crests used by sorcerers, and perhaps even the ones used by the church, were said to be letters left behind by gods and demons from ancient times.

Can a real demon... actually be summoned?

That was the abyss of sorcery, which the young Zagan knew nothing of. And so, Zagan let out a scream, clearly panicking.

“Nephy, run! Manuela, and the rest of you too!” However, even Zagan knew that was an unreasonable request. After all, the cave was shaking to the point where it could cave in any moment.

It was already covered in fissures from Zagan’s strike, and now there was the power of this magic circle on top of that. The ceiling began to collapse, so even the act of standing up had become difficult.

“Ugh, what’s going on?” Even so, Chastille crawled all the way to Nephy, and

hung over her as if to protect her. In the end, she was an Angelic Knight. Even with her wings, there was no way Manuela could fly in such a confined place, so she was unable to move.

No choice but to face it head on, huh? He didn't know what would show up, but his only choice was to strike them down.

Moments later, it appeared from the center of the magic circle, and Zagan immediately realized his own hubris.

Perhaps because the magic circle was incomplete, or perhaps because it was activated by coincidence, it was just a 'shadow' that possessed no distinct form. However, he still felt *fear* upon seeing the shadow.

It's useless. A human can't do anything to something like this. The mere sight of it made him choke on his breath.

In his eyes, even meeting the twelve Archdemons wasn't as intimidating.

Nephy turned pale and was trembling. Chastille was unable to bear it and lost consciousness. And Manuela was covering her face as she cowered.

This is... a demon...! He was given the second name 'Sorcerer Slayer,' but did the monster before him even wield sorcery? And even if it were sorcery, would Zagan's output be able to counterbalance it?

It was likely impossible. After all, no matter how much power one obtained, man could not become god.

And so, just as he readied himself to die... The monster... suddenly fell to its knee, almost as if... it was bowing to Zagan. Then, it uttered some rather shocking words.

"Oh, my king. Order me as you will." The monster who surpassed human intellect... was for some reason obeying Zagan.

As he tried to straighten out his thoughts, he noticed that a glyph had appeared on his own fist. It was the Sigil of the Archdemon that he inherited... and the monster was bowing before it.

What the hell... did I just obtain? The seat of Archdemon held far too much power to be considered a mere title.

Epilogue

The morning sun stretched out after the long break of dawn.

The monster went home at Zagan's command. He didn't know where it was summoned from, but it was definitely an area that was wholly unknown to him.

Immediately after that, the cave began to collapse, and Zagan was forced to escape while carrying Nephy, Chastille, Manuela, and even Barbatos.

Well, he really did think it was surprising that he made it in time like that.

Honestly, there was no way he should have made it, but just when he thought it was all over, those three Angelic Knights came jumping in to the rescue. And because they carried Chastille and Manuela, they all managed to make it.

He thought they were totally useless, but at the very end, they truly were helpful.

...Well, until the end, they were clamoring on in an annoying manner going, 'We were only prioritizing the safety of Lady Chastille and the civilian, so it's not like we were cooperating with an evil sorcerer or overlooking them,' though.

And just like that, they carried Chastille off and left. They also recovered the Sacred Sword that Barbatos had confiscated from her. In the end, he had no chance to exchange words with her since she was unconscious.

After they took Chastille away, Manuela also returned home.

"All that's left now is for the two of you to discuss things, okay?" She left those meddlesome words behind as they parted.

And then, the only ones left gazing at the collapsed cave were Zagan, Nephy, and Barbatos. While staring at the wreckage of rocks, Zagan asked Barbatos a question.

"So, what'll you do? You going to continue?"

“...Haaa, what do you expect me to do after seeing that monster?” Though imperfect, Zagan showed that he could enslave the monster — even now he didn’t know whether it should be called a ‘demon.’

At that, it seemed that all of Barbatos’ hostility had broken.

“So, what was it? If I just bring over some good booze then it’ll work as an apology, was it?”

“Yeah, I’ll be expecting something first class, though.”

“Yeah yeah.” After Barbatos managed to recuperate to the point of being able to stand up, he disappeared.

That man was surely still scheming to catch Zagan off guard with a trap. However, Zagan didn’t really have a problem with that.

He was just that kind of man, so in Zagan’s eyes, he didn’t really need to be killed. He couldn’t bring himself to hate his unwanted friend, so he left him alive.

After that, Zagan and Nephy were finally alone.

What should I do...? What should I say...? Even though he’d reached the point where he could talk to her properly over the last half a month, he’d lost all nerve once more.

At any rate, it had only been a single day since Zagan hurt Nephy and drove her out.

As sweat formed on his brow, the first one to open their mouth was Nephy.

“Master, I want... to be by your side.”

“...Is that fine? I’ve treated you terribly, so you don’t have to force yourself.”

“Master, with you... it’s fine.” And Zagan may have been charmed by her with that.

What’s that? You’ve gotten stronger, haven’t you?

Compared to Zagan, who was completely lost in trying to convey a single word, she was far stronger. And so, Zagan replied with a troubled face.

“However, it can’t be like it was before.”

“It... can’t?”

“Yeah, it can’t.” As Zagan knelt before Nephy, he stared right into her azure eyes.

He had words that he had to convey to her. He needed to say he wouldn’t leave her alone anymore. He needed her to know that he would protect her, even if he had to employ all the authority of an Archdemon.

That was how far he was willing to go to keep her by his side forever. And above all else... *I’m... fond of Nephy. I’m in love with her.*

She still wished to return to him after he’d hurt her so. If such feelings weren’t conveyed to him, then he wouldn’t have been brave enough to speak his mind.

After quietly steadying his breathing, Zagan opened his mouth to speak.

“I don’t want you to call me Master... Use my name instead.”

Nephy stared at him in wonder after he said that.

“Is ‘Master’ no good?”

“Yeah, it’s no good. If you call me that, you would be a slave no matter how much time passes, and I would be nothing more than your owner, right?” Zagan grasped the bewildered Nephy’s shoulders.

“Not a slave, not a servant, not even a disciple... I don’t want our relationship to be any of those.”

“M-Meaning...?” Her pointed ears began shaking as if they were convulsing.

And Zagan was also trembling as he spoke.

“Meaning, I lo...ve...”

I love you That simple phrase wouldn’t come out, as if it was caught deep in his throat.

His throat was parched and dry, so his words died down. He’d defeated Barbatos in an instant, and even turned away a demon, but now his knee was trembling pathetically.

And as that discord within him came to an end, some rather odd words rushed out of Zagan's mouth.

"You belong to me. Forever, until one of us dies, no, even after death!" After saying that, he sank to the floor, clearly crestfallen.

Why can't I convey that one simple word, 'love'! He had his heart stolen away the moment he saw her. Wanting to be loved by her, he moved about every which way over the past half a month. Still, because he was a timid coward, he'd only ended up hurting her. And even though it was the perfect time to open his heart and convey his feelings, Zagan was unable to do so.

As tears began to well up in his eyes due to his own incompetence, Nephy replied happily.

"Yes!" She nodded like always, smiling like a blooming flower.

Nephy... smiled...

That was the very first time Zagan saw such an expression. And, as he was unintentionally fascinated by that, Nephy took out the fragments of her collar. Until a few hours ago, it was wrapped around her neck. However, because it was removed with the key, it wasn't broken.

"Could you... please put this on me again?"

"No, that's no good, right? This is a slave's..." As Zagan began to speak, Nephy placed her index finger against his lips.

"This is fine. For Master and I..." As she started to say something, Nephy mumbled as if she was troubled by how to continue.

"Is this not the first thing that connected Master Zagan and I?"

At those words, Zagan took the collar that he once released her from into his hand. He was unable to convey his feelings. And yet, Nephy was saying to put the collar on her. As if... it was a ring of vows.

It was far too boorish to call it an engagement ring, but to the two of them, it was unmistakably 'proof,' so to speak.

"Yeah, I got it." And so, Zagan tightened the collar around Nephy's neck.

It sealed Nephy's mana, chained her, and was a generally unpleasant lump of iron to look at, yet it was a symbol of happiness to the two of them.

After that, Nephy tilted her head to the side as she stared at Zagan blankly.

"Um, Master Zagan."

"Yes?"

"What exactly is our relationship if I'm not your slave, servant, or disciple...?"

Zagan's face stiffened up. *I'm the one who wants to ask that! I want us to be lovers*, Zagan thought, his face in anguish as he was unable to speak those words.

I, an Archdemon, made an elven slave my bride, but how do I express my love to her? And from his heart, he prayed that someone would teach him.

Afterword

Hello everyone, this will be our first meeting. I have come to deliver 'An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride' to you. My name is Fuminori Teshima.

This story is about the meeting between a man who, while possessing tremendous power, lived a cruel life, and a beautiful girl with a sad fate. It is a great rom-com about them deepening their bonds, or so I hope...

Well, setting the jokes aside, it's a pretty good fantasy story, which is something I haven't written in a while.

There's swords and magic, elves and avians, and animal-eared therianthropes and the like. There are also gods, Archdemons, demons, and more! Plus, this is a world where they use currency made of gold and silver. And on top of all that, our protagonist is a young man who stole food as a child and was beaten for it.

After falling in love with an elven girl at first sight, the young man learned about something that he couldn't obtain through force alone. For, you see, a sorcerer who shut himself into a dark research room like him possessed no conversational skills.

It would be nice if you could continue to watch over such a pitiful first love.

Let's see, it's been about two years since I wrote such an RPG-like fantasy story, I think. It's somehow both nostalgic and embarrassing at the same time.

Speaking of it being a long time, about COMTA, who has taken charge of the illustrations for this volume. Actually, they were also responsible for the series called 'The Blunder of Shadow Butler Mark.' And so, this marks the second time we've teamed up.

Because of that, I was relieved, since I didn't have to worry about the quality of the art at all.

About my plans from here on, first coming in February is the sale of the novel version of the second volume for 'Desktop Army Hamelin's Whistling Fairy.'

I'm taking charge of the novelization of the anime broadcasting next spring 'Frame Arm Girls,' and am also planning to finally put it on sale in April through Famitsu Bunko. Also, I have prepared another new work with Famitsu Bunko, so I do believe it will come out around the same time.

There are various other new works stirring about, but these are the only ones I can talk about at the moment. I think my other new works will probably be on sale by the rainy season, though.

Anyway, I'm just glad that my work caught your attention on this occasion.

To the one who put up with the planning for this book, and for providing all sorts of great feedback, K. The illustrator who provided me with sweet and beautiful images, COMTA. To everyone who took part in the cover design, proofreading, publicity, and similar duties. To my children who have lately ended up cooking me omelet rice and more. And to you, my dear readers, who have picked up this book are reading these words at this very moment.

Thank you very much!

January 2017: On an evening where I wish to build plastic models

— Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

Nephy's Cooking Experience

"Master, the preparations for lunch have been completed," said Nephy, as her snow-white hair swayed through the air.

"I see. I'll be right there."

Zagan shut the grimoire he had been leafing through and stood up. He'd decided to show his gratitude for having his meals prepared for him with a smile, but in the end, he could only feel slightly down about being unable to do anything but nod with a sour look on his face. After arriving at the dining hall, he noticed that bread, soup, and the main dish of lamb stew had already been lined up on the table.

"Wow, lunch is looking pretty tasty today."

"I am unworthy of such praise, Master." Even while expressionless, Nephy's pointy ears happily quivered with a twitch at Zagan's compliment.

"But you've never eaten this sort of meal before right, Nephy? How are you able to make it so perfectly?"

"C-Calling it perfect is a little..." Nephy muttered, bashfully gripping her apron, then continued by saying, "I was never given any to eat, but I was tasked with helping out in the kitchen."

"Ah, so you have made it before?"

"No, I was permitted to do little more than peeling the vegetables."

"Huh...? How did that help you learn how to cook?"

As Zagan tilted his head to the side, in an unusual turn, Nephy clenched her fist and responded in an earnest voice.

"Well... I was always watching intently."

“By watching, you mean the steps to cook...?”

“There was also that, but I mean... the ingredients.”

Zagan thought that she was joking for a moment, but it seemed Nephy was completely serious.

“The meals they were cooking in those pots always smelled amazing when they mixed with the spices. And since I was quite hungry for the most part... Well, in any case, it was painful. That was why I ended up memorizing how to do it while I gazed at them longingly.”

“Didn’t they... get mad at you for that?”

“Because they got angry, I always stared at them from the crack in the door.”

Zagan tried to imagine the sight of this expressionless girl peeking in from the crack in a door. In his mind, whenever her eyes met the person she was peeking on, she would surely have trembled with a start. The mere thought of that made him think his face was going to loosen up in joy.

“Master, please do not laugh.”

“No, it’s not like I was laughing. Look, let’s just eat now.”

And on that day as well, Zagan and Nephy sat side by side and gripped their spoons in hand.

Chastille and the Three Doting Knights

“I am Archangel Chastille Lillqvist... Though you may be unhappy wielding your sword under the command of one who had their subordinates slaughtered before their eyes, I’ll have great expectations of you from here on out, gentlemen.”

Three Angelic Knights in the prime of their lives lined up in front of Chastille as she raised a gallant voice with Sacred Sword in hand. Just the other day, Chastille ended up losing her subordinates in a certain incident, so these three men were the personnel selected to replace them. The three Angelic Knights, however, simply shook their heads as if she was completely off the mark.

“We are to wield our swords under the Maiden of the Sacred Sword. It’s an extraordinary honor, so who in their right mind would express discontent?”

“...There’s no need to pay me such respect. Their deaths are my responsibility, after all.”

“Lady Chastille, we are Angelic Knights. It’s certainly true that it’s painful to lose our comrades, but every single one of us has already decided to put our lives on the line. The sight of a girl young enough to be my daughter making such a dispirited expression weighs more heavily on my heart than that, I assure you. Ah, please have a seat.”

Chastille sat down without thinking about it as he presented a chair to her.

“He’s right. We will not ask that you forget about them, but there is no need for you to carry such a heavy burden on your own. Ah, we’ve made some tea. Would you like some?”

“M-Mmm... I suppose I’ll have some.”

“Also, this here is a popular cake in town. Please enjoy as much as you like.”

“Thank you... No, huh? Cake? Is this really the right time?”

“Ah, could you perhaps cross your legs while you hold the cup? Yes, just like that.”

Chastille just went along with the flow and did as they said, which made the three Angelic Knights look at her fondly while smiling. And just then, Chastille suddenly came to her senses.

“A-Are you three messing with me?”

“Perish the thought! Lady Chastille is like a daughter to us!”

“Indeed. As you are the lone woman among the Archangels, it is also our duty to show you the affection we would show a daughter in serving you, Lady Chastille.”

“Is that how it works...?”

The sheer vigor with which they spoke somehow fooled Chastille into believing they were telling the truth.

“No, wait, this is pretty weird, isn’t it?! I’m your superior officer, right?!”

“There’s no need to worry. In a public place, we shall naturally serve as your silent shields, Lady Chastille.”

“That’s not the problem here!”

The Angelic Knights felt their faces slacken as they witnessed Chastille being brought to the verge of tears.

She didn’t sense any form of respect one would normally have for their superior, but while being teased by them, Chastille was once more able to smile like she could before.

Dress up with Manuela

“Welcome to the shop! Come on in, Nephy!”

Manuela greeted Nephy in a cheerful tone as she set foot inside the shop. This was a clothing shop which had everything from casual clothing to equipment for adventurers. Nephy had just come the other day, but she had forgotten to buy something at that time. Such was the case, but Nephy was yanked into the depths of the shop before she even had a chance to explain that fact.

“Um, today, I’m—”

“I get it, don’t worry. You probably don’t have any sleepwear, right? You didn’t buy any last time around, so I thought it was about time for you to drop by.”

Nephy stared back at Manuela in wonder, as her guess had been right on the money. And despite that, not a single one of her other facial muscles made even the slightest movements, which was perhaps actually quite impressive in a certain sense. After reaching the changing room, she realized a whole lineup of nightwear was already laid out for her.

“Heh... Now then, I’m gonna put you in all sorts of clothes today, alright?”

“Um, could the reason you didn’t point out that I forgot to buy some the other day be...”

“Well, yeah. If that master of yours was with you, he wouldn’t have let me make you try on anything indecent, now would he?”

“I’m sorry. I forgot something, so I must head back at once.”

Manuela firmly grasped the nape of Nephy’s neck as she tried to dash away.

“Now now, your master will *definitely* be delighted, you know?”

Those words made Nephy’s heart jump. And using that momentary pause as an opening, Manuela shut the door and the dressing room was sealed tight.

“First up is this see-through negligee! If you approach him with this, even your master will fall in one strike, you see?”

“Um... er... doesn’t this... not even fulfill the role of underwear...?”

“Hmmm, so you want something more underwear like, huh? Then... how ’bout this garter belt and lingerie?”

“I-Is this... really something... you sleep in...?”

Manuela stripped Nephy and changed her clothes with such quick movements that she couldn’t follow them with her eyes. Her terrifying speed made Nephy question if some unidentifiable sorcery was involved. Eventually, after watching Nephy fall to her knees and let out a sigh, Manuela put on a surprised expression.

“This applies to your master too, but you’re quite inexperienced huh, Nephy?”

After letting out that remark, she clapped her hands as if she just thought of some no good prank.

“Then, what if you do something like this for him?”

“A lap pillow... You say?”

“Yep! For you two, something more simple like that may be best.”

“...If I ever have the opportunity... I will try it out.”

Contrary to expectations, that opportunity presented itself far sooner than she believed it would, but that is a story for another time.

Encounter with a Fluffy Creature

“Master, there is some unidentifiable creature present.” Though she spoke in a monotonous voice, the tips of Nephy’s pointy ears were drooping down. It seemed she was frightened.

“What creature?”

The area surrounding Zagan’s castle was called the Forest of the Lost, and once in a while, monsters emerged. They were rather weak, but if there was a possibility that they would harm Nephy, then there was a need to destroy them. Zagan flipped open his robe and walked over to Nephy, but...

“What the... Isn’t this a cat? It’s probably a stray who got lost in the forest.”

“A... cat...?”

Zagan found a kitten with fur that was the same color as Nephy’s hair upon inspecting the creature she spoke of.

“What’s that? Is this your first time seeing one?”

“Yes. There were no such animals in Norden.”

“Cats are household pets around here. After you brush them gently, they quickly grow attached, which people like. Plus, they’re completely harmless to both man and beast.”

As Zagan tried to brush the kitten’s head to demonstrate, it hissed at him and ran off to hide behind Nephy.

“Ugh... Y-you son of a...!”

How dare you reject my touch?!

Zagan ground his teeth, his eyes bloodshot from rage, as the kitten evaded him. Nephy then timidly took the kitten into her arms and gently brushed its fur.

“It’s so soft,” Nephy said, expressionless all the while, though her ears did quiver as if she were deeply moved. Eventually, she held the kitten out toward Zagan.

“By all means, Master.”

“No, it’s not like I really wanted to pet it or anything... Well, whatever...”

He no longer knew who was demonstrating to who, but Zagan tried petting the kitten’s head regardless. This time around, it seemed to be fine with him, since it didn’t attempt to run away.

“...I see. It really *is* soft, huh?”

“Yes. It’s very cute, too.”

You’re far cuter, though. Or so he wanted to say, but Zagan was unable to utter such romantic words.

And so, he merely continued to gaze at Nephy’s ears, which were happily quivering, as he pretended to enjoy petting the kitten.



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An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 1

by Fuminori Teshima

Translated by Hikoki Edited by DxS

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